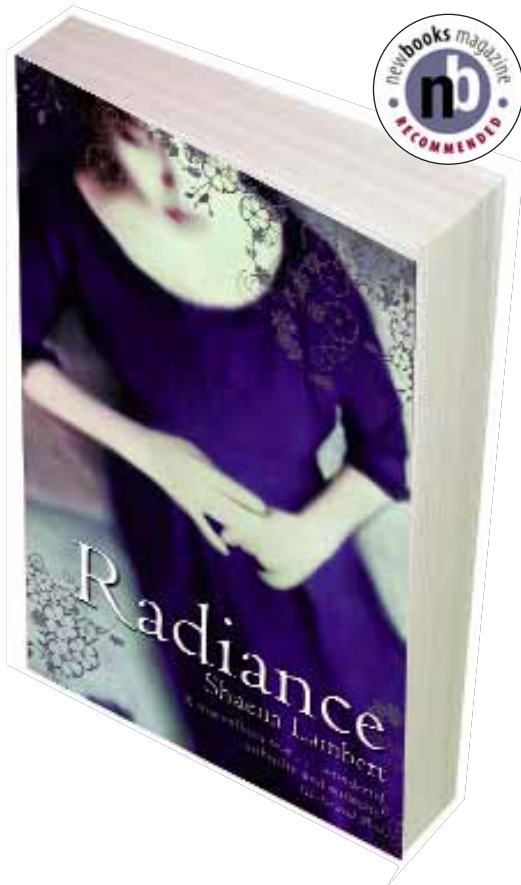


# Radiance

Shaena Lambert



Keiko steps on to a New York airstrip in March 1952, turning one horribly scarred cheek away from the pop and flare of the news photographers' cameras. An eighteen-year-old survivor of the atomic bomb that destroyed Hiroshima and killed the people she loved, Keiko has been chosen from hundreds to be the first Hiroshima Maiden, liberal America's new poster girl, brought to the States to receive sponsored treatment for her radiation scars.

*Radiance* is a mesmerising novel about guilt and intimacy set against the backdrop of an America both appalled and entranced by its own destructive power.

When the Hiroshima Project was long over and all the dust had settled, Daisy discovered that she could close her eyes anywhere, in a crowded room or doing the dishes, and see the girl getting off the plane. She would always think of Keiko as “the girl,” though she had been eighteen when she came to stay, old enough to be called a woman. The press seized upon the name Hiroshima Maiden—such an odd way to describe an A-bomb survivor: as though Keiko might have stepped out of an Arthurian legend, wearing a cone-shaped princess hat; as though being ravaged by the bomb might have transformed the girl, giving her, along with a history of suffering, some fairy-tale virtues. Purity perhaps. Or maidenly goodness.

Daisy Lawrence had stood in a small roped-off area on the tarmac of Mitchell Air Force Base, waiting for the airplane to land. Irene Day, one of the Hiroshima Project's principal organizers, stood beside her. The rain was stiff that day—stinging pellets that flew at them sideways out of the gauzy marsh east of the air

base. A few feet away a dozen journalists huddled in a grey group, hats pulled low.

Irene Day had dressed appropriately—she always did—in a mannish little fedora and matching kid gloves. She was the sort of woman, Daisy thought, who would choose the right outfit for a hurricane. Next to her Daisy felt dowdy—blond hair frizzing in the wet, feet aching in tight patent-leather pumps.

Of course she knew better than to be thinking about her shoes at a time like this. This was an important moment in history, this chill March day of 1952: she was about to greet a Hiroshima survivor, the first ever to set foot on American soil. Daisy pulled in her stomach, already held tightly in place by her girdle, and did her best to adopt a look of calm expectancy. She moved closer to a freckle-faced young photographer, so that his broad back blocked the rain, which seemed to come from all directions now—stinging her chin and cheeks and the backs of her knees.

At last the gleaming plane hove into view ►►

“Daisy felt dowdy—blond hair frizzing in the wet, feet aching in tight patent-leather pumps.”

above their heads. It headed out to sea, then banked and came in low, bouncing at the end of the runway, rising like a bird, landing, hissing, skipping. It hung poised for several seconds on one wheel before righting itself with a bump and coming to a stop, emitting black exhaust in a rather alarming fashion. For what seemed an inordinately long time the airplane engine thudded and the propellers churned and thumped. But at last the propellers stilled, the plane gave a final shudder and several air force cadets rolled the steel stairs into place.

The airplane door, massive and unyielding, seemed to need some battering knocks from the inside before it swung open. The pilot, a wing commander in a navy uniform complete with epaulettes, stepped jauntily down the steps, shook hands with the cadets, then walked across the runway. He was followed by two stewards and twenty tanned, robust soldiers—the plane seemed endlessly to disgorge them—men returning from military duty in Hawaii, where the plane had touched down for refuelling.

Then at last Keiko stepped onto the platform. She lifted one gloved hand to straighten her hat. How strangely it glowed in the overcast air, whiter than white. Even from this distance Daisy could see the mottled rhubarb stain on her cheek. The famous atomic scar. She tottered on the platform, looking as though the hard rain might blow her away. The purse Keiko clasped—Daisy learned later—had been picked up in a Honolulu gift shop. It was encrusted with tiny iridescent nautilus.

Daisy felt an urge to say something to mark the magnitude of the occasion. She turned to Irene, but she was already up ahead, arguing with one of the cadets guarding the gate. He clicked the metal latch with his thumb in an irritating manner, then shook his head severely.

"But I'm the *chief* organizer of this project," Irene was saying. She wasn't, but how was the cadet to know? He shrugged. Irene raised her hand, as though intending to knock the boy's cap off. "Let me by," she hissed, but all at once the freckle-faced photographer, the one whose broad back had sheltered Daisy from the rain, strode forward and leapt the rope. The cadet cried out for him to stop, but the photographer had an agenda of his own: he dashed towards the plane, leaping puddles, soaking his trouser legs, letting his hat blow off, not even turning to see it roll wildly away. And now the rest of them followed suit, and Irene and Daisy were picked up and blown, or so it felt, over the trampled rope and across the runway. They were no longer the official welcoming delegation, not by a long shot: they were part of a mob.

That was Keiko Kitigawa's welcome to America.

The girl turned towards the advancing stampede. With one hand she groped behind her for the banister. The other hand she held up, fingers spread in

an ineffectual fan, attempting to shield her face, with its bubbled scar, from the repeated flash of the cameras.

Imagine a girl to whom you can attach any stereotype.

Imagine her stepping off a plane, holding up a hand to keep her prim round hat in place.

Imagine her as inscrutable.

Imagine her as incomparably damaged.

Imagine her as carrying the seeds of something entirely new—radioactive seeds—lodged in her bones, skin, hair.

Imagine her as the first of her kind to come to America: children of the atomic bomb. Children who are asked, repeatedly, in letters that arrive each spring, to donate their bodies to science, so that when they die—six years later, or forty—their hearts can be examined, their cells studied, their kidneys filled with turquoise dye, placed in a Petri dish.

Now imagine what it would take to shake these multiple identities. To stand up, under that weight, and launch yourself out of Tokyo on a Boeing 747, to sleep and wake and find yourself over a huge grey sea—far below you there are the ragged shapes of waves, like ice floes on the tundra.

Whatever occurs down there is invisible. Some species of fish that live in those waters have never been discovered.

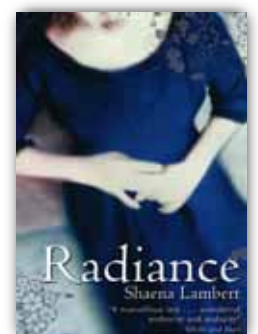
Keiko had come to America to have her face operated on. She had pulled herself forward to this place, urged by her mother, whose spirit she prayed to before leaving Hiroshima. She had risen early, before her Aunt Yoshiko could hear her, and she had dressed in the smart outfit she wore for the first leg of her journey, a herringbone skirt and matching jacket with a cream satin lining. She had crept down the hall to the ugly little parlour decorated in the western way, all her uncle's bad taste. She had knelt before the shelf that held the *ihai*, the little placards that represented the spirits of the dead. Grandfather's placard was more august than Mama's, though they were both quite simple markers, made of white wood with names inscribed in ink and the word *Matsumi* at the bottom. *Spirit*.

During the night the oil light had guttered and gone out. Keiko relit the flame and then made her prayers. Always a tiny part of her asked for forgiveness. Always her mother's spirit was quick to say yes—too quick. She had been prone to indulgences, always giving Keiko two of the red rice cakes at festival time, taking none for herself.

*You have been greedy*, Keiko addressed herself silently. *And you will pay the price*.

"Forgive me," she said out loud—and what she meant was for living when so many others had died. When Mama died. When Grandfather died. And not only must she ask forgiveness for living, but for ▶▶

“They were no longer the official welcoming delegation, not by a long shot: they were part of a mob.”





wanting to live; for receiving the highest marks in her graduating class at Hiroshima Prefectural High School; for rejoicing over things that ought not to bring so much happiness, like the breezes that come up from the Inland Sea, or a cascade of plum blossoms, only yesterday, falling around her, a young man—an American in uniform—smiling at her as she crossed the street. He had seen only one side of her face.

Her interview, four months before, had taken place at the Atomic Bomb Casualty Commission in the building where *hibakusha*, atomic-bomb survivors, were routinely examined. She had sat up very properly in the small room, on the thin high bed covered in white cloth. She had let the American doctor study her face, moving her chin back and forth, pushing back her hair, touching the round keloid behind her left ear. The handsome doctor, his name was Dr. Carney, murmured, “Exceptionally pretty;” not expecting Keiko to understand.

“Thank you.” Her English was polished, almost perfect. Her first surprise for them.

“Tell us a little about yourself,” the kind one had said. His name was Mr. Atchity, the head of the whole project—and because some instinct told her what it took to excel, the words had flowed out. *I believe we must work together to outlaw atomic weapons. Goodwill. Friendship.* And then—when that did not seem to be enough—she had begun to speak of the day of the bombing. Words she had never before spoken came from her mouth, as though guided by a spirit beyond her, like a singer finding, at last, a song in her exact range, a strange song she didn’t know she could sing until that moment.

“There was a bright light.”

Ah.

The two men stopped leafing through their notes, stopped looking to see the name of the next girl.

“I remember it so clearly. A bright, terrible light.”

They listened. Transfixed by what she might say next.

“I was standing on a rock in our garden and I raised my hand—like this, you see—to block the blast.”

The kind one put his papers down. He took off his glasses, wiped them on a handkerchief, put them back on his nose. The other one, the handsome doctor who smelled sweaty, jumped from his chair and took Keiko’s hands and pressed the palms with his thumbs—an excited gesture for which he didn’t seem responsible.

“Miss Kitigawa—we need a girl who is prepared to speak to the American people.”

“I can describe what I remember.”

“And in return we will remove the scar. I believe we can. It looks eminently removable.”

They asked her more questions. They took notes. She told them things she had not spoken, ever. She told them about Grandfather, and Mama, and Mr.

Takahura, all dead. She didn’t tell them everything, but it was enough.

After the interview Keiko returned to her surrogate family: to her uncle who did not love her; to her aunt who was jealous of her. She told them that she had been chosen to go to America. Yoshiko decided to make a fuss. “Keiko-chan—when will we see you again?”

“Perhaps never,” Keiko said coldly—thinking this thought for the first time, realizing how much she wanted it to be true.

Now she knelt before the shelf of her ancestors. This was the last chance she would have, perhaps ever, to kneel like this. She knew that the dead were blaming her, that her mother was pinching her lips together, even as she offered up every excuse for her daughter’s conduct. It was wrong to hold on to life as she had. She knew this.

She prayed for a long time, then stood up, put out the wick and turned her back on the shelf that held her mother’s spirit.

Keiko stared from her airplane window at the frozen sea, its tiny, immaculate pattern of waves. For a while, she thought, she would not be herself. She would have to be what she had said she was to the doctors; to the kind Mr. Atchity, the head of the Hiroshima Project; to the handsome but foul-smelling Dr. Carney, with his plump, hairy knuckles. She would have to be everything they wanted her to be. She would have to be nothing. But that was all right. She had received the highest marks ever on graduating from the Hiroshima Prefectural High School. She was good at what she attempted. Now she would hold her breath and count on her instinct—that instinct she must always ask forgiveness for—to tell her how to survive.

That was Keiko on the day of her arrival.

They drove from the airport in Daisy’s sky-blue Chevrolet, Keiko up front, Irene in the back, leaning forward to talk. Keiko sat up very straight in a dress with layers of tulle beneath black and mauve seersucker. It crunched when she moved. She wore the hat, the gloves. In the trunk was her small but impressive collection of luggage. Daisy had imagined that the girl might arrive with a straw basket, a birdcage and a beaten leather trunk—immigrant luggage—but she came with a pearly set of matching Samsonite cases, a gift from the Japanese end of the Hiroshima Project. Daisy herself owned nothing so chic in the way of luggage.

How strange things must have looked to the girl, Daisy thought. Everything so glancing and bright, yet overprinted by extreme fatigue. Irene pointed out some Jersey cows in a field, their hindquarters bony, and Daisy assured Keiko that most American cows were fatter, a patriotism that embarrassed her ▶▶



immediately; this was the sort of thing that Walter, her husband, always mocked her for.

How unpleasant, too, to have to keep answering Irene's questions, what an effort to draw aside, with each response, the curtain of exhaustion. That was why she chose to say little, beyond introducing herself as Keiko's host. "Homestay mother" was how the Project liked to describe her. Meanwhile, Irene ploughed ahead with her welcoming comments, pointing out the shape of the city in the distance, explaining the next week's worth of activities.

"Eleanor Roosevelt. You know who she is, of course. Remarkable woman. She wants to meet you. I've made those arrangements, but not tonight. Tonight there's to be a party at my apartment, just the editors of the *Sunday Review*, and Daisy Lawrence here—you'll be staying with her next week, right after your first operation. Oh, and Dr. Carney will be at the party, of course—you've met him—and Dean Atchity, our fearless leader." She continued relentlessly. It seemed to Daisy that if Irene hesitated, even for a second, she would be forced to take in the reality: this quiet girl in the front seat who, turning slightly to acknowledge Irene, had no choice but to present her left cheek, with its massive atomic scar.

The only reason Daisy was in the car at that moment, hurtling towards the overcast city, doing something so bright and shocking that she felt dizzy, the only reason she was there at all was because she had run into Irene on Fifth Avenue five months before.

"Daisy Parker—not really!" Irene had leaned forward and kissed Daisy's cheek, a dry, papery touch that for some reason had made Daisy feel homesick.

"You haven't changed at all," Daisy said.

"Oh, I'm infinitely older. Ancient. But look at you. *Margaret Mary Parker*. We used to call you that, didn't we?"

Yes, her college friends had, spurred on by Irene, who had delighted in the arcane sound of Daisy's full name—the toning of church bells, the smell of incense. Daisy's gentle father had chosen it in a moment of religious enthusiasm following her birth, one of the rare moments he had put his foot down; Daisy's mother had shortened it immediately. Only one or two of the sisters at Sacred Heart, where Daisy went to school, had insisted on using the full name—and Irene, of course.

They had been quite close in college and then fallen away during the long war years, when they had little in common. Daisy had become a stenographer at Porter and Peck, while Irene had married and divorced twice. The second marriage had ended disastrously two weeks into the honeymoon. "He kept making passes at the ship's steward," Irene had told Daisy. "Imagine my discomfort. I had to bunk in with friends to give them time to be alone." Sometimes Irene made her life seem like a series of glittering events that had

happened to somebody else.

"But look at you, Daisy," she said. "The suburbs must suit you. And how's that dishy husband of yours? Still writing?"

When Daisy mentioned that Walter was writing for radio, Irene rolled the word around in her mouth, as though to detect, by mouth feel, whether it was glamorous or outdated. "How wonderful! Shows I know?"

Daisy mentioned a few.

"A clever man, your Walter. And of course I think *Fall from Grace* has a seminal—absolutely seminal—place in American theatre." *Fall from Grace* was the play Walter had written many years before, before Daisy had met him. It had had a decent run off Broadway; one reviewer had even said that it was as good as something Clifford Odets would write. Then the war had come, and Walter had broken ties with all his old progressive friends, and come back changed. He had married Daisy, moved to the suburbs and written nothing important since.

"I was sorry—" Irene stopped.

Daisy had forgotten this side of Irene: how she could lower her voice, look you in the eyes, come gently to the point. In college, Daisy had sometimes felt that Irene represented the exact centre of the universe.

"Thank you."

"You told me about it last time we met. I wondered, you know, if I had listened properly."

They were talking about Daisy's miscarriage, her first one (Irene didn't know about the second), and the discussion they had had about it almost three years before. No, Irene had not listened properly. She had given herself over to the subject with rapt enthusiasm, offering condolences, providing theories—too many theories, some of them Freudian—about Daisy's depression.

"You were fine. You were wonderful."

Then all at once Irene looked sharply at Daisy, really looked at her. She took her by the arm, pinching her skin—such was her enthusiasm. "I have an idea," she had said. They walked up Forty-second Street to Schraffts, in the Chrysler Building, and ordered cheeseburgers and Coke. There, amid the hubbub of shoppers eating their creamed soup and burgers and hot fudge sundaes, Irene told her about the Hiroshima Project. It was backed by the *Sunday Review*, Irene's magazine, and it had all been going swimmingly until the Quaker woman chosen to be Keiko's host had backed out, afraid of the effect of atomic radiation on her children.

"Quakers are awfully difficult to work with," Irene sighed. "So passive. So silent. A most trying people." ■

***Radiance*** by  
Shaena Lambert  
is published by  
Virago,  
price £7.99  
and is available  
from all good  
bookshops.

