



Amy Sommers

AUTHOR

Amy Sommers first began studying China and Chinese at university in the 1980s. Later, as a China-focused lawyer, she moved to Shanghai to work as an international law firm partner helping Fortune 500 companies invest and operate in China. Together with her husband and two then small sons, her family lived in China for over 11 fascinating years. Since returning to the United States in 2015, Amy splits her time between Seattle and a bucolic island on the border with Canada that forms the setting for her next writing project involving descendants of British soldiers, looted imperial property, land appropriated from native residents, seafood smuggling, and murder.

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Rumors From Shanghai

It's 1940 when Tolt Gross, an African-American law graduate, arrives in booming Shanghai from the provincial backwater of Seattle. He takes on a senior role managing the Asia operations of a US flour company, a position with responsibility and status rarely available to a Black man in America. But the job comes with a humiliating precondition – he must report to a man who despises him. Tolt is introduced to the delights of Shanghai's social and nightlife, flourishing despite Japan's invasion of China three years earlier, but in the middle of the hard work and hard play, Tolt stumbles on a secret plan that Japan is developing to destroy the U.S. Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii, which could destroy his life and much much more. How to give the alarm? Would anyone believe a warning from a Black man in Shanghai?



"Shanghai in 1940 – an international city where anything was possible. Amy Sommers atmospherically recaptures Shanghai on the eve of one of its major turning points and snares the reader in a tale of war, international intrigue and a time when personal decisions were crucial."

– Paul French, author of *Midnight in Peking*

"This is a story about the gifts that come with cultural exchange, the perils of refusing them, and what it's like to lose them. An African American businessman finds freedom and respect in a city where money rules over race. His cosmopolitan life in Shanghai includes nights on the town with his beloved friends from China and Japan. As nationalism and war draw ever closer, the group's public embrace of equality puts them in peril. By deftly shaping historical details, Amy Sommers has written a story for our precarious times."

– Nancy Rawles, author of *My Jim*



- Publisher - Earnshaw Books
- Publication - March 1st 2021
- Fiction
- \$23.99USD

***Rumors from Shanghai* is set in the months leading up to the December 8, 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor. What inspired you to want to revisit that event from 80 years ago?**

The September 11th attacks initially gave me the idea for the book. In the aftermath, we learned that various warnings of possible attack or anomalous behavior warranting investigation had been issued in the months leading up to 9/11, but American authorities had ignored them. These stories made me curious as to whether there was a historical precedent for the U.S. to have received warnings of attack, and ignored them with thousands of resulting deaths. It turned out there was: Pearl Harbor. So, *Rumors from Shanghai* began as an allegory of sorts for 9/11.

Tolt Gross, *Rumors*' protagonist is a Black man. He sounds improbable, for 1940s Shanghai and America—a Black law graduate? With a wealthy grandfather?

I drew from realities in creating Tolt Gross, and in so doing, found that truth sometimes really is stranger than fiction! An early Black University of Washington-trained lawyer, William McDonald Austin, whose picture I first saw 85 years after he graduated inspired my imaginings of a talented, trained professional who can get no suitable work in Seattle and must strike out elsewhere. Many years after I began writing *Rumors*, I learned that Austin successfully passed the bar exam. However, he was unable to find work as a lawyer in Seattle and so left. Where did he go? To the Philippines 'where he had professional connections and intended to practice law'!

Austin inspired an imagined grandson of William Grose (or Gross), Seattle's second Black resident and one of early Seattle's wealthiest citizens. William Grose was never enslaved, and before the Civil War worked for the U.S. Navy on voyages that took him all over the world (Latin America, Japan, the Arctic). After the navy, he became a cook at mining camps and helped run the Underground Railroad in California. In his work helping the formerly enslaved, he even went to Panama to persuade officials there not to return escapees to the United States! At his death, he was among the biggest landowners in Seattle. One of the many interesting things about him was that he was known to give a helping hand to new arrivals to Seattle (most of them white) and to have been what we today would call a 'successful business networker.' I imagined those attributes as having created the conditions for a fictional grandson to thrive in ways most Black people weren't permitted.

So, yes, there were in fact Black Seattleites whose lived experience contained elements of the background I devised for Tolt Gross.

You said *Rumors* began as an allegory for 9/11. Did you find commonalities between those events?

My research on the Pearl Harbor attack made me realize that part of authorities' resistance to addressing the risk America faced was due to bigotry about their opponent's capabilities. Similarly, in the run up to 9/11, U.S. authorities also were dismissive of the risk that the Taliban - a fundamentalist group in poverty-stricken and remote Afghanistan - posed a danger within the borders of the United States, just as 60 years earlier they had pooh-poohed the possibility that the non-technically advanced Japanese could initiate an attack on U.S. territory. I wanted my story's protagonist to explore the prevailing narrative about who has agency to be adventurous, who has credibility to be believed, and what is lost to society by allowing bigotry to dominate our decisions.

In *Rumors*, the protagonist enjoys close relationships with Japanese and Chinese and is viewed favorably as a Black man in a professional role. To what extent does that depiction reflect realities of that period? Would a Black person have been welcomed in pre-WW2 China or Japan?

As a matter of fact, there were much greater (both in degree and significance) interactions by Black Americans in Asia in the 1920s and 1930s than is commonly recognized. In his memoir, the very successful musician, band leader and arranger, Buck Clayton, wrote, "I still say today that the two years I spent in China were the happiest two years of my life. My life seemed to begin in Shanghai. We were recognized for a change and treated with so much respect."

In this essay for BlackPast.org, I describe the ambitious endeavors of the African diaspora during the Interwar Era, in fields as varied as the performing arts/entertainment (music, singing, dancing, even professional baseball!), international relations, faith, and writing/journalism. How respectfully and positively African Americans were treated in Asia is a recurring theme. So, yes, that Tolt Gross would have thrived in Asia is entirely consistent with the experiences of real Black Americans who went there.

The novel is fictional, but the setting and the historical events are real. Was there anything that you uncovered about Pearl Harbor that surprised you?

One was the innovation that the Pearl Harbor attack represented. Historically, navies were armed, and their strategies formulated, on the assumption that battleships would be the key tool for engaging in naval warfare. That had been true for hundreds of years before World War II, and in 1941, that was the lens both Japan and the United States used in assessing the Pearl Harbor attack's impact. Both countries initially believed the attack was successful because it damaged or destroyed eight of the nine battleships in the U.S. Pacific Fleet!

What enabled the attack was naval aviation. Prior to Pearl Harbor, no country had used naval aviation to carry out such a large-scale military offensive, nor one so far afield from the attacker's base of operations, with no chance of calling for backup or support. Given the prevailing understanding of how a navy fought and won (or lost), both Japan and the United States believed the attack succeeded.

Yet, over the course of the war, aviation emerged as a far more significant and flexible offensive tool of naval warfare (just as the real planner of the Pearl Harbor attack, Commander Minoru Genda, had posited). It was naval aviation and the use of aircraft carriers that enabled U.S. forces to create a foothold at Guadalcanal less than a year after Pearl Harbor, and then use that approach to work their way up the Pacific through 1945 to constrain and weaken Japan's forces. If on December 7, 1941 the U.S. Pacific Fleet's three aircraft carriers had been at anchor, instead out at sea on maneuvers, that would have been a far more significant blow to the United States' military capabilities than damage to its battleships turned out to be.

How did the milieu of jazz age, Art Deco Shanghai, infuse *Rumors from Shanghai*?

While much of the world was suffering through the privations of the Great Depression, Shanghai had thrived. Ultra modern buildings -- highrise hotels, glamorous movie theatres, nightclubs, chic apartment buildings -- had been built. People from all over the world flocked there to work, play, make and lose fortunes. Jazz music and dancing, horse racing, greyhound racing, jai alai, 'paper' hunting (chasing paper clues in lieu of chasing a fox!) were all popular pastimes. Memoirs and photographs of that time make one long for a Netflix series to bring the elegance and glamour to life!

In depicting just how much Tolt has at stake when he must decide whether to sound the alarm about the risk of attack, I wanted the reader to feel just how idyllic life could be in Shanghai at that time if one had money to sample all the delights on offer. And, in that respect, the Shanghai of the 1930s bore a similarity to the Shanghai I was privileged to live in for 11 years. It was -- and is -- an amazing, beautiful and vibrant place.