

# How to Be a Conqueror

by Matthew Salesses

1. In 1956, John Wayne played Genghis Khan in the *The Conqueror*. It was a Howard Hughes film, shot, epic-scale, in the deserts of Utah. Susan Hayward was a Tartar princess, stolen away to the Mongolian Steppes. The last line was: “from forth their loins sprang a race of conquerors.”

2. Utah had been a successful nuclear test site three years earlier. Of the 220 Hollywooders involved with *The Conqueror*, 91 were eventually diagnosed with cancer. Susan Hayward died of complications in 1975, and John Wayne followed four years later. Under normal circumstances, maybe 30 of the 220 *should have* expected cancer.

3. Barry watched the movie knowing these facts. He liked to come home from teaching to a movie. He ate dinner in front of the TV. This had been his routine since his girlfriend had left him in May. Now it was December, and the wind carried the cold from pocket to pocket. He stuffed his hands into his pajamas as if to hoard up all his warmth.

4. The movies he liked best were the ones in which white people played Asian leads. Since his girlfriend had left, that Barry was adopted had seemed to become more of a fact. He took pleasure in watching *The Conqueror*, knowing who would get it and who wouldn't.

5. Barry taught his fifth-grade class that Genghis Khan was not terrible. Genghis Khan *had* murdered, but he had also united his people. Genghis Khan's real name was Temujin. As Khan of Mongolia, he had established a meritocracy, disallowed racism and religious prejudice, and enforced women's rights.

6. In *The Conqueror*, John Wayne said, "There are moments for wisdom and moments when I listen to my blood; my blood says, take this Tartar woman."

7. Barry had trouble suspending his disbelief. His girlfriend had left a list of what to work on for his next relationship. Suspending his disbelief followed one bullet. "• Do not doubt yourself," she had written. Not being so serious followed another.

8. As he watched, he began to wonder which scene had given which actor his fatal dose of radiation. The film was really about life and death.

9. Rereading his girlfriend's letter, she hadn't said anything about race. She had said, in the strangest line that seemed a little less strange, "We never fought."

10. After Genghis Khan defeated the Jin Dynasty, he told the Khitan prince, Chu'Tsai, that the prince's forefathers had been avenged. Chu'Tsai's father had worked under the Jin regime that had overthrown the Khitan. The prince replied that his father had served the Dynasty well, and he did not consider his father his enemy, so revenge did not apply. Genghis Khan left him in charge of much of Mongolia.

11. Barry watched the yellow-faced actor with empathy.

12. Genghis Khan once wrote to a Taoist monk: "I, living in the northern wilderness, have not inordinate passions."

13. John Wayne said: "I stole you. I will keep you. Before the sun sets, you will come willingly to my arms."

