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Shanghai Girls: A Novel



Synopsis

BONUS: This edition contains a Shanghai Girls discussion guide and an excerpt from Lisa See's *Dreams of Joy*. In 1937 Shanghai—the Paris of Asia—twenty-one-year-old Pearl Chin and her younger sister, May, are having the time of their lives. Both are beautiful, modern, and carefree—until the day their father tells them that he has gambled away their wealth. To repay his debts, he must sell the girls as wives to suitors who have traveled from Los Angeles to find Chinese brides. As Japanese bombs fall on their beloved city, Pearl and May set out on the journey of a lifetime, from the Chinese countryside to the shores of America. Though inseparable best friends, the sisters also harbor petty jealousies and rivalries. Along the way they make terrible sacrifices, face impossible choices, and confront a devastating, life-changing secret, but through it all the two heroines of this astounding new novel hold fast to who they are—Shanghai girls.

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Customer Reviews

I'm a fan of Lisa See's two earlier novels, "Snow Flower and the Secret Fan" and "Peony in Love", both of which were set in 19th and 17th century China respectively. In "Shanghai Girls", the author moves the setting of the novel to Shanghai and later to the US. Lisa See paints a vivid portrait of life

in pre-World War II Shanghai and takes the reader on an unforgettable journey through the Japanese invasion of China and its aftermath. The protagonists in this novel are two sisters - Pearl and May. Pearl is the older sister, born in the auspicious Year of the Dragon, yet frowned upon by her Baba [father] who dislikes her tall appearance. Pearl is also educated, having completed college, and is proficient in a few languages and dialects. In contrast, younger sister May, born in the Year of the Sheep, is shorter yet lovely, and has only managed to complete high school. Yet, for all Pearl's accomplishments, it is May that is the apple of her parent's eyes, and uses this partiality to her advantage. Both sisters live a life of privilege, yet they work as 'beautiful girls' posing for pictures used in ads and posters and earn a good living. This may appear surprising given their parent's conservative outlook [the girls' mother has bound feet], yet not altogether strange as later events bring to light the family's dire financial straits. When the girls are told their father has huge debts and has decided to marry them off to a pair of brothers, Gold Mountain Men residing in LA [men who have left China to go to America to seek their fortunes, returning to find China Brides], they realize their days of freedom are over and decide to revolt. Unfortunately, the Japanese invasion of Shanghai puts an end to any of their plans.

I felt I had a duty to finish this advance copy in order to write an honest review about the novel. I can't say that it was pulling teeth to finish it. But I can't say that I would have finished it if I had simply checked it out of the library and had no obligation to review it on . The writing is meh. You'll find that the author's major lacking is in the use of descriptors and imagery. While there was plenty of opportunity--from the Chinese cooking, to the sights of Shanghai, to the horrors of war and the trauma of rape, to the physical beauty of the women subjects--the author's descriptions could have been far more vivid and compelling than they actually were. The plot was not bad, but it was somewhat predictable. The flow of the story actually picked up a great deal towards the last 1/2 of the book, and towards the end, I was reading at a rapid clip b/c of the suspense. Unfortunately, the book ends with a pretty major cliffhanger, so it's obvious that the author probably has a sequel in mind for these characters. If you want a better read on life in China during the pre-war period, I highly recommend Iris Chang's *The Rape of Nanking* which is compelling and heart-wrenching. If you want a great read on mother-daughter and sisterly relationships in the context of intergenerational and intercultural American-Chinese differences, I would greatly recommend just about anything by Amy Tan, whose characters and their relationships are so vividly narrated and rich, that I am often convinced that she is writing about my own Chinese mother and myself (a first generation Asian American woman).

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