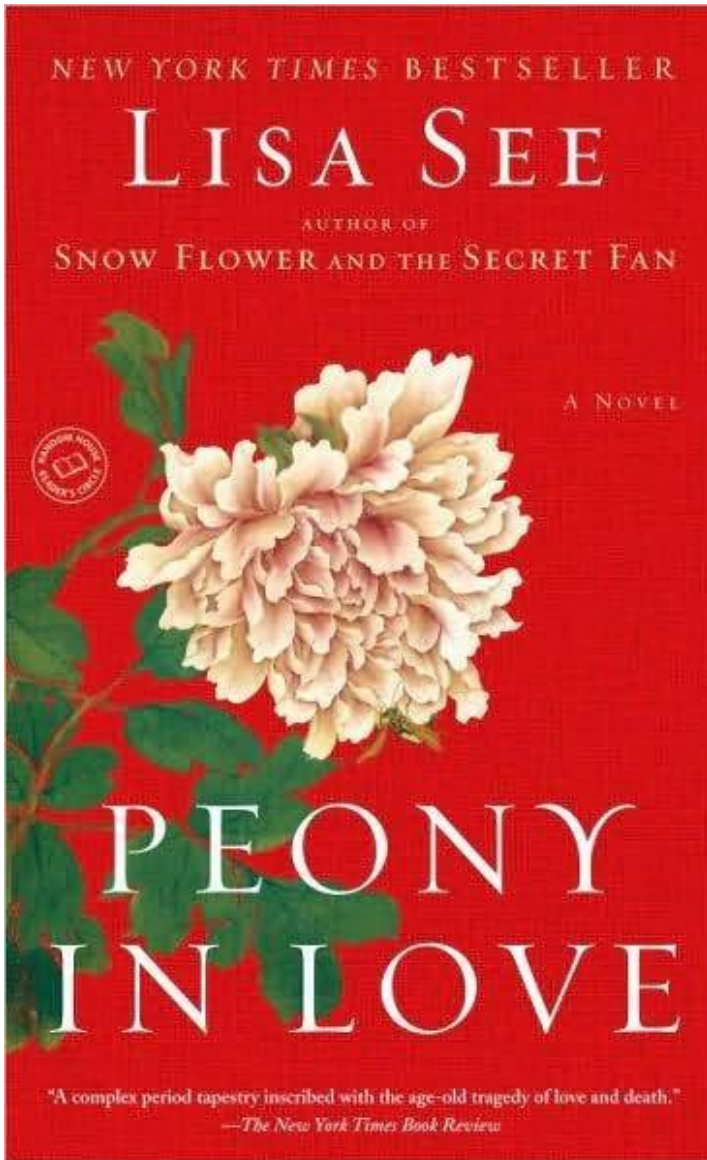


## Ann Arbor District Library: Book Club to Go Discussion Guide

### About the Book



For young Peony, betrothed to a suitor she has never met, the lyrics from *The Peony Pavilion* mirror her own longings. In the garden of the Chen Family Villa, amidst the scents of ginger, green tea, and jasmine, a small theatrical troupe is performing choice scenes from this epic opera, a live spectacle few girls, even women, have ever seen. Like the heroine in the drama, Peony too is cloistered and from a wealthy family, trapped like a good-luck cricket in a bamboo-and-lacquer cage. Though raised to be obedient, Peony has dreams of her own.

Peony's mother is against the production: "Unmarried girls should not be seen in public." But Peony's father prevails, assuring his wife that proprieties will be maintained. Women will watch the opera from behind a screen to hide them from view. Yet through its cracks, Peony catches sight of an elegant, handsome man with hair as black as a cave -- and is immediately overcome with too many emotions.

So begins Peony's unforgettable journey of love and destiny, desire and sorrow -- as Lisa See's haunting new novel takes readers back to 17th century China... Based on a true story, *Peony in Love* uses the richness and magic of the Chinese afterlife to transcend death and explore the many manifestations of love. Ultimately, it's about universal themes: the bonds of female friendship, the power of words, the desire all women have to be heard, and finally those emotions that are so strong that they transcend time, place, and perhaps even death. *Source:* <http://www.lisasee.com>

**About the Author** Source: <http://www.bookbrowse.com>

Lisa See was born in Paris in 1955 but grew up in Los Angeles, spending much of her time in Chinatown. Her first book, *On Gold Mountain: The One Hundred Year Odyssey of My Chinese-American Family*, was a national bestseller and a New York Times Notable Book of 1995. The book traces the journey of Lisa's great-grandfather, Fong See, who overcame obstacles at every step to become the 100-year-old godfather of Los Angeles's Chinatown and the patriarch of a sprawling family.

In addition to writing books, Ms. See was the *Publishers Weekly* West Coast Correspondent for thirteen years. As a freelance journalist, her articles have appeared in *Vogue*, *Self*, *The New York Times Book Review*, *The Los Angeles Times Magazine*, *The Washington Post Book World*, and *TV Guide*.

Ms. See serves as a Los Angeles City Commissioner on the El Pueblo de Los Angeles Monument Authority. She was honored as National Woman of the Year by the Organization of Chinese American Women in 2001 and was also the recipient of the Chinese American Museum's History Makers Award in Fall 2003.

Ms. See lives in Los Angeles with her husband and two sons.

## Reviews

*Library Journal* \* Starred Review \*

In 17th-century China, pampered daughters of wealthy families emulated the romantic tragedy depicted in the popular opera *The Peony Pavilion*. These teenagers, known as the lovesick maidens, starved themselves to death, writing of romantic perfection. Such is the basis for See's extraordinary new novel. During a performance of *The Peony Pavilion* on her family's estate, 15-year-old Peony (the real-life Chen Tong) has a chaste but daringly forbidden chance encounter with a young poet just as she is about to enter into an arranged marriage. Now unable to bear being wed to a stranger, Peony refuses all sustenance while she writes her thoughts of romance in the margins of the play's script. At her death, Peony, trapped in the afterworld as a tortured "hungry ghost," infiltrates her beloved's subsequent marriages, seeking respite from her torment. See takes another little-known chapter of Chinese history, flavors it with the minutely researched customs and superstitions of the time, and produces a soaring, stunning novel of Chinese women who gave voice to their creative endeavors, no matter what the cost. Highly recommended.

*Publishers Weekly* \*Starred Review\*

Set in 17th-century China, See's fifth novel is a coming-of-age story, a ghost story, a family saga and a work of musical and social history. As Peony, the 15-year-old daughter of the wealthy Chen family, approaches an arranged marriage, she commits an unthinkable breach of etiquette when she accidentally comes upon a man who has

entered the family garden. Unusually for a girl of her time, Peony has been educated and revels in studying *The Peony Pavilion*, a real opera published in 1598, as the repercussions of the meeting unfold. The novel's plot mirrors that of the opera, and eternal themes abound: an intelligent girl chafing against the restrictions of expected behavior; fiction's educative powers; the rocky path of love between lovers and in families. It figures into the plot that generations of young Chinese women, known as the lovesick maidens, became obsessed with *The Peony Pavilion*, and, in a Werther-like passion, many starved themselves to death. See (*Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, etc.) offers meticulous depiction of women's roles in Qing and Ming dynasty China (including horrifying foot-binding scenes) and vivid descriptions of daily Qing life, festivals and rituals. Peony's vibrant voice, perfectly pitched between the novel's historical and passionate depths, carries her story beautifully—in life and afterlife.

**Discussion Questions** Source: <http://www.lisasee.com>

1. First and foremost, *Peony in Love* is about love. What are the different kinds of love that Peony experiences? How does Peony's love for Ren change through the years? Have you had similar experiences in your life?
2. In what ways is mother love explored? How does it change from a mother's or daughter's perspective? Do these things still hold true for mothers and daughters today?
3. What does Peony learn about mother love and in what ways does she experience it herself?
4. One thousand years ago, the poet Han Yun wrote, "All things not at peace will cry out." What do you think he meant by that? And in what ways does this inspire Peony and the other women writers in the novel?
5. In what ways does Peony long to be heard? Do you think women today are really heard for who they are? In what ways have you tried to be heard?
6. What are the parallels between the lovesick maidens and girls with anorexia nervosa today?
7. We see a difference in Peony's actions after Ze marries Ren and again after Ze dies. Do you see redemption here for Peony?
8. Could you sympathize with Peony's actions in the years immediately following her death? Which of the three wives do you sympathize with the most, and why?
9. What are the differences and similarities between the Chinese afterworld and western concepts of heaven and hell? Which seem better? Which would you prefer – for yourself and for your loved ones?
10. How does what happened during the Cataclysm change depending on who's telling the story?

11. How do Peony's experiences as a living girl and then as a hungry ghost parallel Liniang's experiences in "*The Peony Pavilion*"?
12. In what ways do you feel Peony's eyes were opened to the reality of her father's real character?
13. Compare the actions of Peony's mother and grandmother after they meet in death with their actions when they were alive.
14. *Peony in Love* shows the strength of women and women's companionship, but in what ways does it also show the dark shadow side of women whether in the women's chambers, between a mother and daughter, between wives, or even between friends?
15. The novel looks at the Chinese veneration of ancestors as well as the desire to have sons. How are these two beliefs connected?
16. Lisa has written before about footbinding. What's the importance of footbinding in this novel? What does Peony learn about life and love through her experiences of footbinding? What do you think caused the change in Peony's ability to assist in footbinding?
17. What role does the plum tree play in the opera of "*The Peony Pavilion*" and in *Peony in Love*?
18. How are jealousy and envy addressed in the novel?
19. Were you surprised to hear about the women writers in China in the 17th century? Do you think it's important that we know about them today?
20. Compare the roles of women in China in the 1600s to the roles of women in the United States in the same period.

## Multimedia

### **'Peony in Love' Explores Chinese Women's Lives (Radio Broadcast)**

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=11640153>

A review of the novel on NPR.

### **Lisa See-Peony in Love-Bookbits author interview (Video Clip)**

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v8iW93ddTXg>

The title character in Lisa See's new novel "*Peony in Love*" dies early on in the book. But the story of her two loves: the man she almost married and the tragic Chinese opera she adored, continues in her afterlife as a 'hungry ghost'.

## Further Reading

***Shanghai Girls*** by Lisa See

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1329809>

(Call number: Fiction See)

In 1937, Shanghai is the Paris of Asia, a city of great wealth and glamour, the home of millionaires and beggars, gangsters and gamblers, patriots and revolutionaries, artists and warlords. Thanks to the financial security and material comforts provided by their father's prosperous rickshaw business, twenty-one-year-old Pearl Chin and her younger sister, May, are having the time of their lives. Though both sisters wave off authority and tradition, they couldn't be more different: Pearl is a Dragon sign, strong and stubborn, while May is a true Sheep, adorable and placid. Both are beautiful, modern, and carefree . . . until the day their father tells them that he has gambled away their wealth and that in order to repay his debts he must sell the girls as wives to suitors who have traveled from California to find Chinese brides.

**\*Book Club To Go!\* *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* by Lisa See**

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1245235>

(Call number: Fiction See)

In nineteenth-century China, in a remote Hunan county, a girl named Lily, at the tender age of seven, is paired with a laotong, "old same," in an emotional match that will last a lifetime. The laotong, Snow Flower, introduces herself by sending Lily a silk fan on which she's painted a poem in nu shu, a unique language that Chinese women created in order to communicate in secret, away from the influence of men. As the years pass, Lily and Snow Flower send messages on fans, compose stories on handkerchiefs, reaching out of isolation to share their hopes, dreams, and accomplishments. Together, they endure the agony of foot-binding, and reflect upon their arranged marriages, shared loneliness, and the joys and tragedies of motherhood. The two find solace, developing a bond that keeps their spirits alive. But when a misunderstanding arises, their deep friendship suddenly threatens to tear apart.

***Dreams of Joy* by Lisa See**

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1380959>

(Call number: Fiction See)

A continuation of "*Shanghai Girls*" finds a devastated Joy fleeing to China to search for her real father while her mother, Pearl, desperately pursues her, a dual quest marked by their encounters with the nation's intolerant Communist culture.

***Author's official website***

<http://www.lisasee.com/>

Information, news, and resources from the author.

## **Read-Alikes**

***The Secrets of Jin-Shei* by Alma Alexander**

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1225066>

(Call number: Fiction Alexander)

Enter an ancient world of courtly elegance and intrigue, where sages are also sorcerers, and the daughter of a lowly seamstress can become a companion to an empress. In this magical land there is a secret language -- a language that women have passed down from mother to daughter for countless generations -- a language that signals a bond like

no other . . . the bond of jin-shei. Set in a mythical Chinese kingdom, *The Secrets of Jin-shei* is a timeless story of what sustains friendship -- and what tears it apart.

***Inheritance*** by Lan Samantha Chang

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1227602>

(Call number: Fiction Chang)

In 1931 China, two young sisters, abandoned after their mother's suicide, promise never to leave each other. Set against the backdrop of political chaos and social upheaval, the story traces the echo of betrayal through generations and explores the elusive nature of trust.

***Passing Under Heaven*** by Justin Hill

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1264912>

(Call number: Fiction Hill)

In the last years of the Tang Dynasty, a beautiful girl is born in a fort along the Great Wall of China, and is set to become the most famous and celebrated courtesan of her age. Set in the 9th century, *Passing Under Heaven* tells the tragic love story of Lily, and documents a time when Chinese women enjoyed a window of unprecedented personal freedom—including the freedom to fall in love. But when Lily pushes that freedom to its limits, disaster ensues, leaving her child and husband to forever mourn her loss.

***Empress Orchid*** by Anchee Min

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1213343>

(Call number: Fiction Min)

The setting is China's Forbidden City in the last days of its imperial glory, a vast complex of palaces and gardens run by thousands of eunuchs and encircled by a wall in the center of Peking. In this highly ordered place -- tradition-bound, ruled by strict etiquette, rife with political and erotic tension -- the Emperor, "the Son of Heaven," performs two duties: he must rule the court and conceive an heir. To achieve the latter, tradition provides a stupendous hierarchy of hundreds of wives and concubines. It is as a minor concubine that the beautiful Tzu Hsi, known as Orchid as a girl, enters the Forbidden City at the age of seventeen. It is not a good time to enter the city. The Ch'ing Dynasty in 1852 has lost its vitality, and the court has become an insular, xenophobic place.

***The Last Empress*** by Anchee Min

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1280680>

(Call number: Fiction Min)

*The Last Empress* is the story of Orchid's dramatic transition from a strong-willed, instinctive young woman to a wise and politically savvy leader who ruled China for more than four decades. Moving from the intimacy of the concubine quarters into the spotlight of the world stage, Orchid must face not only the perilous condition of her empire but also a series of devastating personal losses, as first her son and then her adopted son succumb to early death.

***Empress*** by Shan Sa

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1267348>

(Call number: Fiction Sa)

A ravishing historical novel of one of China's most controversial historical figures: its first and only female emperor, Empress Wu, who emerged in the Tang Dynasty and ushered in a golden age. In seventh--century China, during the great Tang dynasty, a young girl from the humble Wu clan entered the imperial gynaecium, which housed ten thousand concubines. Inside the Forbidden City, she witnessed seductions, plots, murders, and brazen acts of treason. Propelled by a shrewd intelligence, an extraordinary persistence, and a friendship with the imperial heir, she rose through the ranks to become the first Empress of China.

***The Palace of Heavenly Pleasure*** by Adam Williams

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1238540>

(Call number: Fiction Williams)

Northern China, 1899. As the Boxer Rebellion erupts, a cast of innocents, fanatics, sinners, and lovers are drawn to the Palace of Heavenly Pleasure - an infamous brothel that overlooks an execution ground - where the fury of the East will meet the ideals of the West and all will face their destiny. Adam Williams's first novel is a historical tour-de-force and a triumphant return to traditional storytelling on a truly grand scale.

### **Extra!**

In contrast to many of the mother-daughter relationships in the book, go around the group and describe funny memories you have of experiences with your mothers.

*Summaries from AADL.org Catalog*



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