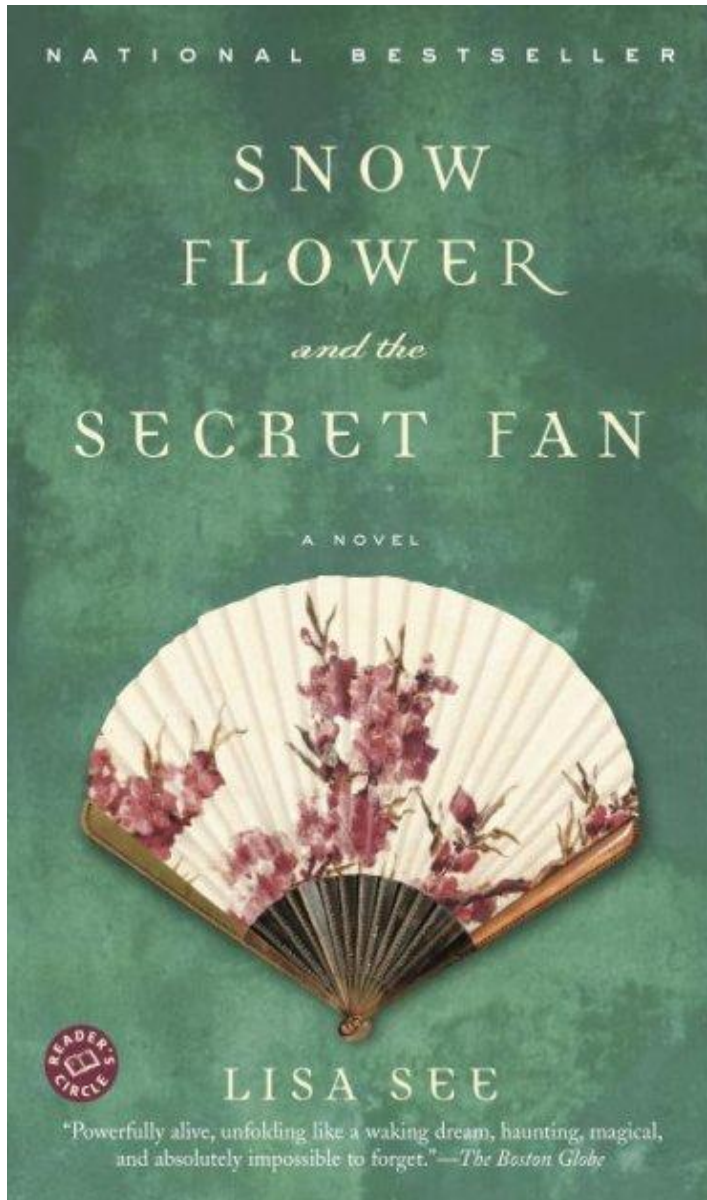


Ann Arbor District Library: Book Club to Go Discussion Guide

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1308890>

About the Book



A language kept secret for a thousand years forms the backdrop for an unforgettable novel of two Chinese women whose friendship and love sustains them through their lives.

This absorbing novel takes place in 19th century China when girls had their feet bound, then spent the rest of their lives in seclusion with only a single window from which to see. Illiterate and isolated, they were not expected to think, be creative, or have emotions. But in one remote county, women developed their own secret code, nu shu – "women's writing" – the only gender-based written language to have been found in the world. Some girls were paired as "old-sames" in emotional matches that lasted throughout their lives. They painted letters on fans, embroidered messages on handkerchiefs, and composed stories, thereby reaching out of their windows to share their hopes, dreams, and accomplishments.

An old woman tells of her relationship with her "old-same," their arranged marriages, and the joys and tragedies of motherhood—until a terrible misunderstanding written on their secret fan threatens to tear them apart. With the detail and emotional resonance of *Memoirs of a Geisha*, *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* delves into one of the most mysterious and treasured relationships of all time—female friendship. 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.

Awards

Snow Flower and the Secret Fan received an honorable mention from the Asian/Pacific American Awards for Literature (<http://www.apalaweb.org/awards/literature-awards/>).

Reviews

Kirkus

A nuanced exploration of women's friendship and women's writing in a remote corner of Imperial China.

At the end of her life, Lady Lily Lu, the 80-year-old matriarch of Tongkou village, sits down to write her final memoir—one that will be burned at her death. Using nu shu, a secret script designed and kept by women, Lily spends her final years recounting her training as a woman, her longing for love and the central friendship of her life. Born, in 1823, into an ordinary farming family, Lily might not have ended up as a wealthy matriarch. Her earliest memories are of running through the fields outside with her cousin Beautiful Moon in the last days before her foot-binding. But in childhood, Lily's middle-class fate changed dramatically when the local diviner suggested that her well-formed feet made her eligible for a high-status marriage and for a special ceremonial friendship with a laotong (sworn bosom friend). Accordingly, Lily became laotong with Snow Flower, a charming girl from an upper-class household. Together, the two begin a friendship and intimate nu shu correspondence that develops with them through years of house training, marriages, childbirths and changes in social status. See (*Dragon Bones*,

2003, etc.) is fascinated by imagining how women with constrained existences might have found solace—and poetry—within the unexpected, little known writing form that is nu shu. Occasionally, in the midst of notes about childbirth and marriages, Lily and Snow Flower wonder how to understand the value of their secret writing in relation to the men's "outside world." The question is left delicately open. As the Taiping Rebellion (1851-64) approaches the villages around them, threatening to disrupt the social order, Lily and Snow Flower's private intimacy changes, stretches and is strained. Taut and vibrant, the story offers a delicately painted view of a sequestered world and provides a richly textured account of how women might understand their own lives.

Booklist

Mystery writer See, author of *The Interior* (1999) and *Dragon Bones* (2003), takes readers to nineteenth-century China to explore a complex friendship between two women. Lily is the daughter of a farmer in Puwei Village, and Snow Flower is the daughter of a respectable family from Tongkou, and though the two girls have very different backgrounds, Madame Wang pairs the two as laotong, or "old sames," a bond that will last them a lifetime. The two begin to exchange messages in nu shu, a secret language known only to women. Their friendship is cemented during their youth and then put to the test when the girls prepare for marriage and Lily discovers a startling secret about Snow Flower's family. As Lily solidifies her place in her new family, Snow Flower suffers in her marriage, and the two grow apart as Lily's pride in her position swells. See's writing is intricate and graceful, and her attention to detail never wavers, making for a lush, involving reading experience. This beautiful tale should have wide appeal.

The New York Times Book Review

Lily and Snow Flower, two girls growing up in Hunan province in 19th-century China, are matched as laotongs, or "old sames," pledging a lifelong friendship that sees them through arranged marriages, deaths, civil unrest and much more. At the core of this female union is nu shu, a secret women's writing thought to have been invented in the same province almost 1,000 years earlier. Over many decades, Lily and Snow Flower use this code to write the stories of their lives on a fan that Snow Flower first sent Lily when they were children. As adults, their futures spin in different directions: Lily marries a prosperous and decent man while Snow Flower ends up with a butcher who abuses her. See skillfully conveys the isolation endured by so many Chinese women, providing heart-wrenching descriptions of the cloistered domestic world into which young girls retreat, and essentially remain for the rest of their lives. See's knowledge of Chinese history never sounds preachy or textbookish; instead, she deploys sympathetic characters within the constraints of a specific place and time.

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

1. Lily endures excruciating pain in order to have her feet bound. What reasons are given for this dangerous practice?
2. Did See's descriptions of footbinding remind you of any Western traditions?

3. If some men in 19th-century China knew about nu shu and “old same” friendships, why do you think they allowed these traditions to persist?
4. Reflecting on her first few decades, Lily seems to think her friendship with Snow Flower brought her more good than harm. Do you agree?
5. Lily's adherence to social customs can seem controversial to us today. Pick a scene where you would have acted differently. Why?
6. Lily defies the wishes of her son in order to pair her grandson with Peony. Does she fully justify her behavior?
7. Lily sometimes pulls us out of the present moment to reflect--as an old woman--on her youthful decisions. What does this device add to the story?
8. How would you film these moments of reflection?
9. If Lily is writing her story to Snow Flower in the afterworld, what do you think Snow Flower's response would or should be?
10. Did you recognize any aspects of your own friendships in the bond between Lily and Snow Flower?

Multimedia

New Film Shows Pains, Gains of Female Friendship (Radio Broadcast)

<http://www.npr.org/2011/07/14/137843735/new-film-shows-pains-gains-of-female-friendship>

A discussion of the film adaptation of the novel on NPR.

Snow Flower and the Secret Fan (Movie)

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1395007>;

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1395021>

(Call number: DVD FLC-CHI Snow; Blu-ray FLC-CHI Snow)

The 2011 film adaptation of the novel, directed by Wayne Wang.

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. As Japanese bombs fall on their beloved city, Pearl and May set out on the journey of a lifetime, one that will take them through the Chinese countryside, in and out of the clutch of brutal soldiers, and across the Pacific to the shores of America. In Los Angeles they begin a fresh chapter, trying to find love with the strangers they have married, brushing against the seduction of Hollywood, and striving to embrace American life even as they fight against discrimination, brave Communist witch hunts, and find themselves hemmed in by Chinatown's old ways and rules. At its heart, *Shanghai Girls* is a story of sisters: Pearl and May are inseparable best friends who share hopes, dreams, and a deep connection, but like sisters everywhere they also harbor petty jealousies and rivalries. They love each other, but each knows exactly where to drive the knife to hurt the other the most. Along the way they face terrible sacrifices, make 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.

Peony in Love by Lisa See

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1286026>

(Call number: Fiction See)

"I finally understand what the poets have written. In spring, moved to passion; in autumn only regret." For young Peony, betrothed to a suitor she has never met, these lyrics from *The Peony Pavilion* mirror her own longings. In the garden of the Chen Family Villa, amid the scent of ginger, green tea, and jasmine, a small theatrical troupe is performing scenes from this epic opera, a live spectacle few females have ever seen. Like the heroine in the drama, Peony is the cloistered daughter of 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 her daughter's attending the production: "Unmarried girls should not be seen in public." But Peony's father assures his wife that proprieties will be maintained, and that the women will watch the opera from behind a screen. Yet through its cracks, Peony catches sight of an elegant, handsome man with hair as black as a cave-and is immediately overcome with emotion. So begins Peony's unforgettable journey of love and destiny, desire and sorrow-as Lisa See's haunting new novel, based on actual historical events, takes readers back to seventeenth-century China, after the Manchus seize power and the Ming dynasty is crushed. Steeped in traditions and ritual, this story brings to life another time and place-even the intricate realm of the afterworld, with its protocols, pathways, and stages of existence, a vividly imagined place where one's soul is divided into three, ancestors offer guidance, misdeeds are punished, and hungry ghosts wander the earth. Immersed in the richness and magic of the Chinese vision of the afterlife, transcending even death, *Peony in Love* explores, beautifully, the many manifestations of love. Ultimately, Lisa See's new novel addresses universal themes: the bonds of friendship, the power of words, and the age-old desire of women to be heard.

Dreams of Joy by Lisa See

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

(Call number: Fiction See)

In her beloved New York Times bestsellers *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, *Peony in Love*, and, most recently, *Shanghai Girls*, Lisa See has brilliantly illuminated the potent bonds of mother love, romantic love, and love of country. Now, in her most powerful novel yet, she returns to these timeless themes, continuing the story of sisters Pearl and May from *Shanghai Girls*, and Pearl's strong-willed nineteen-year-old daughter, Joy. Reeling from newly uncovered family secrets, and anger at her mother and aunt for keeping them from her, Joy runs away to Shanghai in early 1957 to find her birth father—the artist Z.G. Li, with whom both May and Pearl were once in love. Dazzled by him, and blinded by idealism and defiance, Joy throws herself into the New Society of Red China, heedless of the dangers in the communist regime. Devastated by Joy's flight and terrified for her safety, Pearl is determined to save her daughter, no matter the personal cost. From the crowded city to remote villages, Pearl confronts old demons and almost insurmountable challenges as she follows Joy, hoping for reconciliation. Yet even as Joy's and Pearl's separate journeys converge, one of the most tragic episodes in China's history threatens their very lives. Acclaimed for her richly drawn characters and vivid storytelling, Lisa See once again renders a family challenged by tragedy and time, yet ultimately united by the resilience of love.

Summaries from AADL.org Catalog

Author's official website

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

Resources, links on a variety of topics, and blog from the author.

Read-Alikes *Source: Booth Library, Eastern Illinois University*

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. Accepting all the joys and responsibilities of jin-shei, eight girls pledge lifelong loyalty to each other: the poet, Tai, whose promise to a dying girl changes the history of an empire; the warrior, Xaorn, an orphan who will protect her chosen family no matter what the cost; Khailin, the scholar, whose thirst for knowledge leads her into a world of dark secrets and alchemy; sage Nhia, the only person with the power to save Khailin; Tammary, the gypsy girl, whose secret lineage could ruin a royal house; Qiaan, daughter of a captain in the Imperial Guard, with family secrets of her own; the healer, Yuet, confidante to the empress; and the empress herself, Liudan, whose search for family and ultimate quest for immortality holds the power to destroy them all.

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. Based on historical fact, Passing Under Heaven is more than the story of the end of a love affair, but also a chronicle of the passing of the Chinese golden age into civil war and ruin.

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. A few short decades earlier, China lost the Opium Wars, and it has done little since to strengthen its defenses or improve diplomatic ties. Instead, the inner circle has turned further inward, naively confident that its troubles are past and the glory of China will keep the "barbarians" -- the outsiders -- at bay. Within the walls of the Forbidden City the consequences of a misstep are deadly. As one of hundreds of women vying for the attention of the Emperor, Orchid soon discovers that she must take matters into her own hands. After training herself in the art of pleasing a man, she bribes her way into the royal bedchamber and seduces the monarch. A grand love affair ensues; the Emperor is a troubled man, but their love is passionate and genuine. Orchid has the great good fortune to bear him a son. Elevated to the rank of Empress, she still must struggle to maintain her position and the right to raise her own child. With the death of the Emperor comes a palace coup that ultimately thrusts Orchid into power, although only as regent until her son's maturity. Now she must rule China as its walls tumble around her, and she alone seems capable of holding the country together. This is an epic story firmly in the mold of Anchee Min's *Becoming Madame Mao*. Like that best-selling historical novel, the heroine of *Empress Orchid* comes down to us with a diabolical reputation -- a woman who seized power through sexual seduction, murder, and endless intrigue. But reality tells a different story. Based on copious research, this is

a vivid portrait of a flawed yet utterly compelling woman who survived in a male world, a woman whose main struggle was not to hold on to power but to her own humanity. Richly detailed and completely gripping, *Empress Orchid* is a novel of high drama and lyricism and the first volume of a trilogy about the life of one of the most important women in history.

The Last Empress by Anchee Min

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

(Call number: Fiction Min)

The last decades of the nineteenth century were a violent period in China's history marked by humiliating foreign incursions and domestic rebellion, ultimately ending in the demise of the Ch'ing dynasty. The only constant during this tumultuous time was the power wielded by one person, the resilient, ever-resourceful Tzu Hsi, Lady Yehonala -- or Empress Orchid, as readers came to know her in Anchee Min's critically acclaimed novel covering the first part of her life. *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. Yearning only to step aside, and yet growing constantly into her role, only she--allied with the progressives, but loyal to the conservative Manchu clan of her dynasty--can hold the nation's rival factions together. Anchee Min offers a powerful revisionist portrait based on extensive research of one of the most important figures in Chinese history. Viciously maligned by the western press of the time as the "Dragon Lady," a manipulative, blood-thirsty woman who held onto power at all costs, the woman Min gives us is a compelling, very human leader who assumed power reluctantly, and who sacrificed all she had to protect those she loved and an empire that was doomed to die.

Empress by Sa Shan

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

(Call number: Fiction Shan)

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. On the one hand, she was a political mastermind who quelled insurrections, eased famine, and opened wide the routes of international trade. On the other, she was a passionate patron of the arts who brought Chinese civilization to unsurpassed heights of knowledge, beauty, and sophistication. And yet, from the moment of her death to the present day, her name has been sullied, her story distorted, and her memoirs obliterated by men taking vengeance on a woman who dared become Emperor. For the first time in thirteen centuries, Empress Wu flings open the gates of her Forbidden City and tells her own astonishing tale--revealing a fascinating, complex figure who in many ways remains modern to this day.

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.

Summaries from AADL.org Catalog

Extras!

Make Lisa See's recipe for the deep fried taro dish that is featured in the novel and serve it at your discussion -- <http://www.lisasee.com/snowflower/taro-recipe/>.



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