

Lisa See

BY JESSICA TEISCH



With her rich cultural heritage and her deep interest in Chinese culture, Lisa See focuses her writing on China, the United States, and their inextricable connections. Her new novel *Shanghai Girls* begins in Shanghai in 1937, with the arranged marriages of two Chinese sisters to two American men, and then traverses the terrain of postwar Los Angeles—from its landscape of discrimination to the negotiation of Chinese customs within America.

See's great-great-grandfather came to the United States to work on the transcontinental railroad, and his son, Fong See, helped found Chinatown in Los Angeles. He lived to be over 100 years old, and had a sprawling family. Even though his great-granddaughter Lisa is only one-eighth Chinese, she grew up deeply immersed in traditional Chinese culture. See spent much of her childhood in Los Angeles's Chinatown with her grandparents and many great-aunts and great-uncles. She thus brings knowledge of both the American and the Chinese experience to bear on her elegant, heavily researched work. Her first book, the acclaimed family history *On Gold Mountain* (1995),

narrates the story of See's China-born family's experiences in California. Her critically acclaimed fiction explores the role of modern China in an interconnected world (the Red Princess mystery series); female relationships in 19th-century China (*Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* [2005]); and romantic and artistic inspiration in 17th-century China (*Peony in Love* [2007]). Despite the exotic nature of her subjects, See speaks to universal experiences and emotions—romance, love, marriage, death, greed, jealousy—while teasing out the particulars of different cultures and eras.

Born in Paris in 1955, See was raised primarily in Los Angeles. Her mother—novelist and *Washington Post* book critic Carolyn See—inspired her writing career. (They have subsequently coauthored novels under pen names.) After graduating from Loyola Marymount University in 1973, See started to freelance, eventually becoming the West Coast correspondent for *Publishers Weekly*. At the encouragement of her great-aunt, See wrote *On Gold Mountain*. Inspired by her research, See then penned her first novel, *Flower Net*; four novels followed. When she is not writing, 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 received the Chinese American Museum's History Makers Award in 2003.

THE BEST-SELLING FAMILY SAGA

On Gold Mountain (1995)

The One-Hundred-Year Odyssey of My Chinese-American Family



As a child, See heard stories from her grandmother and great-aunt Sisse about their family's colorful history—one filled with missionaries, tong wars, and discrimination. In 1989, Sisse encouraged See to record their story. See interviewed more than 100 family members, visited the family village in China, and perused the National Archives and Immigration Office to recount her family's multicultural tale.

THE TOPIC: See's great-great-grandfather Fong Dun Shung emigrated from China to "Gold Mountain" (the United States) with two sons. Arriving in California in 1867, he worked as an herbalist while his sons aided in the construction of the Central Pacific Railroad. His fourth son, Fong See (See's great-grandfather), soon followed, eventually establishing an import empire in Los Angeles, where he became Chinatown's patriarch and scandalized his family by marrying a Caucasian woman. While providing a history of California in the late 19th and 20th centuries, See follows her family through world wars, racism, discrimination, romance, smuggling, scandals, success, secrets and rivalries—and the clash two cultures.

"The elements in See's story that set it apart from other Asian immigrant sagas include not only very early interracial marriage and great financial success, but also a vivid depiction of the growth and development of Los Angeles ... during the early years of the century. Another intriguing aspect of the lives of the See family was their close connection with Hollywood, which initially developed because of their ability to supply the artifacts needed for films with a Chinese setting." ZILPHA KEATLEY SNYDER, LOS ANGELES TIMES, 7/23/95

"See weaves together fascinating stories about her Chinese American heritage. In the process she both illuminates the immigrant experience and reveals the rich fabric of her personal—and uniquely American—multicultural roots." SARA PEYTON, ASIANWEEK, 9/1/95

THE BEST-SELLING FIRST NOVEL

Flower Net (1997)

A Red Princess Mystery

♦ LOS ANGELES TIMES BEST BOOKS LIST, EDGAR AWARD NOMINEE



The first in the Red Princess mystery series, set mostly in China, features David Stark, an American lawyer from the U.S. Attorney's Office, and Liu Hulan, an inspector in the Ministry of Public Security and a Red Princess (the daughter of an old-time Communist). Critically acclaimed for its portrayal of modern China, it was followed by *The Interior* (2000) and *Dragon Bones* (2003).

THE STORY: In 1997, two young men are found dead: the son of the U.S. ambassador to China, discovered in a Beijing Lake; the second, a Red Prince of China's political elite, found off the coast of California in a shipload of undocumented Chinese immigrants. Having linked the deaths to a Chinese gang, the Chinese and American governments decide to collaborate on their investigation. American attorney David Stark and Chinese police inspector Liu Hulan, previously romantically linked, work together in Beijing to attempt to uncover a deadly conspiracy involving international governments, human trafficking, and gangs operating on both sides of the Pacific.

"Although *The Flower Net* is a thriller with the obligatory chase scenes, multiplying bodies, layered conspiracies and revealed villains, in fact it's a wonderful lesson about the changes going on in China as it emerges as a global economic power." DEIRDRE DONAHUE, USA TODAY, 10/30/97

"Readers familiar with present-day Beijing, where a few warrenlike traditional neighborhoods still hold out against the onslaught of garish hotels and office buildings, will take delight in her local descriptions, from the ubiquitous street carts selling candied crab apples to the shining Mercedes-Benzes hooting their way through swarms of Flying Pigeon bicycles." GARY KRIST, NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW, 10/26/97

A SECRET 19TH-CENTURY WORLD

Snow Flower and the Secret Fan (2005)



See's acclaimed fourth novel is many things at once: a portrait of a patriarchal culture; an exploration of friendship and its jealousies, loyalties, and betrayals; and a comment on the spiritual meaning of tradition and ceremony.

See offers detailed insight into different aspects of Chinese culture, including the gut-wrenching practice of foot binding, the magical world of nu shu, and the isolated, lonely world of wives and mothers (★★★★ SELECTION Sept/Oct 2005).

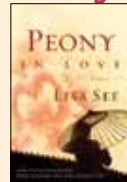
THE STORY: In 1903, Lily Yi, the elderly village matriarch, recounts her life story. Born to a farmer in 1828, Lily is a worthless girl in a culture that reveres boys. But her fate changes at age six, when a matchmaker spies her precious, high-arched feet. Once bound, they will earn her both a husband and a laotong relationship (an arranged bosom friendship) with Snow Flower, a stubborn, beautiful girl from a prestigious family in decline. Writing in nu shu, an ancient secret script shared between women, the two lonely girls pass messages back and forth via a fan over the years and share the intimate details of their lives: their secluded house training, arranged marriages, childbirths, and family joys and tragedies. Then a misunderstanding threatens their deep bond.

"This haunting, beautiful, and ineffably sad tale of longing so intense as to be taken beyond the grave, is written in See's characteristically strong prose. ... It is an extraordinary novel, simply breathtaking." VICTORIA A. BROWNORTH, BALTIMORE SUN, 7/3/05

"It's one thing to know that foot-binding was common in old China. It's another to walk the floor beside a little girl, listening to the gunshot crack of her toes breaking beneath her feet. ... With *Snow Flower*, See has written a novel that ranks with the best fiction of Amy Tan and Maxine Hong Kingston, the modern luminaries of Chinese storytelling." JEFF GRAMMAGE, PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER, 7/26/05

LOVE AND LOSS IN 17TH-CENTURY CHINA

Peony in Love (2007)



See's fifth novel again explores the world of Chinese women—this time, from the perspective of 17th-century girls who yearned for true love and freedom. Drawing on the 17th-century text *The Three Wives Commentary*, the novel explores love, sacrifice, and duty. See researched the spells and traditions of the time, including ghost weddings. (★★★★ Sept/Oct 2007)

THE STORY: In 17th-century China, the opera *The Peony Pavilion*, in which the heroine follows her heart and, as a result, dies, was a powerful cultural phenomenon. Lovesick girls starved themselves to death in the hopes of choosing their own destinies in the afterlife. Perhaps more constructively, thousands of cultured women discovered their literary voice—and wrote poems, travel narratives, and criticism. Drawing on the lives of three such writers, *Peony in Love* presents a personal story of romantic longing, artistic inspiration, metaphysical intrigue, and the dynastic changes in China that fostered this revolutionary moment in history.

“See transports the reader to a distant time and culture steeped in rituals and superstitions. Her descriptions are so vivid—from the painful binding of women’s feet to the beautifully dressed remains of a ‘lovesick maiden’ to the ghosts who gorge on food offerings—that the most fantastic elements seem real.” SUSAN KELLY, USA TODAY, 7/3/07



Shanghai Girls

By Lisa See



THE STORY: In 1937, Shanghai is the “Paris of Asia.” Twenty-one year old Pearl Chin, the narrator, and her 18-year-old sister May live privileged lives as “beautiful girls”—artists’ models for advertisements and calendars. Though from a traditional family, they possess modern, Western outlooks. But when their father gambles away

his wealth, he sells his daughters in arranged marriages to Chinese brothers in Los Angeles. When the Japanese bomb Shanghai, Pearl and May flee China for the United States, and the sisters encounter racism, violence, poverty, and betrayal. Worse, Los Angeles’s Chinatown does not turn out to be the “Gold Mountain” they imagined, but a city of discrimination, Communist witch hunts, betrayals, devastating secrets, and ultimate compromises between China’s old traditions and the new ways of America.

Random House. 314 pages. \$26.95. ISBN: 9781400067114

Christian Science Monitor



“See re-creates the 1950s right down to the molded Jell-O salads and the government assumption that all Chinese immigrants must be Communist spies. ... As with *Snow Flower*, See demonstrates the almost life-giving strength women can gain from sisterhood—and the ways in which they can tear each other apart without even trying.” YVONNE ZIPP

Denver Post



“Few readers will have encountered the kind of culture shocks the sisters experience as they move from the relative freedom

of spoiled rich girls in Shanghai through the war-torn Chinese countryside and on to the United States. ... *Shanghai Girls* is a rich work, one that portrays an immigrant experience as well as plumbing the relationship of sisterhood, with its friction as well as its support.” ROBIN VIDIMOS

Miami Herald



“See goes into much detail about the lives of the Chinese in Los Angeles in the ‘40s and ‘50s, and the sisters’ story becomes inundated with historical context. ... See, whose writing is as graceful as these ‘beautiful girls,’ pulls off another exceptional novel.” AMY CANFIELD

USA Today



“In this moving historical novel, Lisa See explores her Chinese-American roots and those of the Chinese who headed to California in the early 20th century in hopes of a better life, only to find hardship and discrimination. ... See is a gifted writer, and in *Shanghai Girls* she again explores the bonds of sisterhood while powerfully evoking the often nightmarish American immigrant experience.” SUSAN KELLY

New York Times



“The detail is thoughtful and intricate in ways that hardly qualify this book as the stuff of chick lit. Still, its heroines are two clotheshorse sisters who work as models. And they speak the universal language of the genre during the early part of this envelopingly dramatic, two-decade-long story.” JANET MASLIN

Oregonian



“See’s research is excellent, but one hopes she eventually will stretch beyond the boundaries of the multicultural family saga. ... *Shanghai Girls* rarely challenges May and Pearl’s relationship enough for us to appreciate why that bond is stronger than others.” SARA CYPHER

San Francisco Chronicle



“The detail is certainly not only evocative but it can also be wearying; plot and character seem to give way to something that at times reads more like a particularly detailed encyclopedia entry. ... But the razor-sharp skills See summons to describe a silk dress or a crowded street in Los Angeles’ China City are not applied to the characters’ self-deceptions and their emotional consequences.” CHLOË SCHAMA

CRITICAL SUMMARY

Like Lisa See’s previous works, *Shanghai Girls* is a rich, historical novel that portrays the immigrant experience and the bonds of sisterhood. In deft, graceful prose, See depicts the challenges and hardships—many unimaginable—that the Chin sisters face. However, despite the realistic detail and excellent research, particularly in the portrayals of Angel Island and the poverty-ridden China City, some critics thought that the descriptions about the women’s divergent lives in Los Angeles slowed the story. And while most reviewers praised the sympathetic, flesh-and-blood characters,

LISA SEE ON *SHANGHAI GIRLS*

Bookmarks: What was the inspiration for *Shanghai Girls*?

Lisa See: Four things inspired me. First, I've been collecting Shanghai advertising images from the twenties, thirties, and forties for many years. The so-called Beautiful Girls, women who posed for commercial artists, were right in the heart of the excitement in Shanghai. The charming and captivating life illustrated in advertisements is one thing, but I was interested in seeing what real life was like for those women. I also wanted to write about what it was like for Chinese women who came to America in arranged marriages. (We had a lot of arranged marriages in my family. I know how hard life was for the women.) Third, I wanted to write about China City, a short-lived tourist attraction in Los Angeles. Finally, I wanted to write about sisters. The sibling relationship is the longest that we'll have in our lifetimes. A sister knows you your entire life. She should stand by you, support you, and love you, no matter what, but it's also your sister who knows exactly where to drive the knife to hurt you the most.

Bookmarks: In your research for *Shanghai Girls*, what surprised you or interested you the most?

LS: There were several things that interested me: the relationship between sisters, the glamour of Shanghai, the indignities of Angel Island, the mysteries of Chinatown, the brutality of the Confession Program. I once told my editor that I wanted to save something for another book. He said I should write everything I know and am interested in *right now*. I thought that was great advice. So with my books, I try to put in everything I know, am interested in, and surprises me *at that moment*. I like to think that that makes my books layered, varied, and diverse, but of course that's something for readers to decide.

Bookmarks: How did you decide to set the novel during and after World War II?

LS: There were several factors that contributed to when I set the novel. I wanted to write about the Confession Program, which happened in the 1950s. I also wanted to write about what causes people to leave their homes to go to a new country, how people make new homes in new countries, and what are the things we keep and what are the things we leave behind. I was also curious about the nature of place. Pearl and May come from one of the most sophisticated cities on earth, and they move to the fake China City. So which is more real, more Chinese, more authentic, and when and how do the sisters find their own "Chineseness"? To be able to tell that story, I

had to start in the 1930s, specifically 1937, which was the beginning of the end of Shanghai as the Paris of Asia. So I don't know if I *chose* the time to begin the story. Rather, to tell the story I wanted to tell, I was constrained on both ends: the invasion of Shanghai by the Japanese in 1937 and the Confession Program, which began in 1957.

Bookmarks: Which books that you read for *Shanghai Girls* would you recommend?

LS: *Selling Happiness*, by Ellen Johnston Laing. I've been collecting Shanghai calendar girls for years. Now I've written about them! Ellen Johnston Liang's book is not only beautiful but also paints a portrait of the lives of the artists, their cultural and social influences, and how the images they painted were used to transform everyday lives.

Women Writing in Modern China, edited by Amy Dooling and Kristina Torgeson. Often in the West, we are told that in the past there were no women writers. But of course there were! It's just that so much of what they wrote has been lost, forgotten, or deliberately covered up. China has a different tradition. There were a lot of women writers who have remained in print not only in China but also in this country. There are several anthologies of Chinese women writers. *The Red Brush* is probably the most comprehensive; it covers over 2,000 years of women writing in China. (Try to beat that, Western canon!) I also like *The Columbia Anthology of Modern Chinese Literature*, but my favorite is *Women Writing in Modern China*, which covers the early 20th century. These women write about the same things women write about today—love, children, family, heartbreak, war, the economy, and all the things that bind us together as human beings.

Rickshaw, by Lao She. The novel is a study of social misery depicting the struggle, failure, and utter corruption of a rickshaw puller in Peking. In *Shanghai Girls*, Pearl and May's father own a rickshaw business, and there is a character who is a rickshaw puller. I used *Rickshaw* to make sure I was true to the rickshaw puller's experience.

Bookmarks: Which books have you recently enjoyed?

LS: I'm reading *Southland* by Nina Revoyr. I think she's a fantastic writer. I loved *The Age of Dreaming*, so I've gone back to *Southland*, her first novel. I love first novels. They're so fresh and raw. But I'm also enjoying *Southland* as a break from reading four nonfiction books in a row about China: *Hungry Ghosts*, *Shanghai Year*, *Chinese Stories from the Fifties*, and *Art and Politics in China*. ■

a few thought they succumbed to cultural platitudes and lacked introspection into their relationships and self-deceptions. Yet despite these flaws, *Shanghai Girls* is a compel-

ling, educational portrait of Chinese assimilation, sure to be enjoyed by readers of See's previous work. ■