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## **Snow Flower and the Secret Fan**

by Lisa See

Also known as: Lisa See Kendall, Monica Highland

### **“Sidelights”**

Lisa See Kendall, who has published under the pseudonym Lisa See, and with mother, Carolyn See, and John Espey under the joint pseudonym Monica Highland, once told CA: “I’ve been around journalism and letters all my life. My mother, Carolyn See, is a journalist, novelist, and critic. She has taught me everything I know about what might be called the popular, contemporary West Coast literary scene. I’ve known my other collaborator, John Espey, for over twenty-five years. He has taught me about the scholarly life. It is a pleasure to work with them as `Monica Highland.’ I know I speak for all of us when I say that it gives us a feeling of strength in numbers--something all writers need in the West.”

Kendall, one eighth Chinese, presents more than her own life story in her autobiography *On Gold Mountain Mountains: The One-Hundred-Year Odyssey of My Chinese-American Family*. The narrative is “a comprehensive and exhaustively researched account of a Chinese-American family as it deals with their rise and fall of several Los Angeles `Chinatowns,’ with the exigencies of discrimination, fire, flood, earthquake, the Great Depression and two world wars,” summarized Zilpha Keatley Snyder in the Los Angeles Times Book Review. “Intricate genealogy, bravura entrepreneurship, bitter adulteries and perdurable rivalries. . . . business in rambunctious frontier California; ferreting out the heirlooms of abruptly bankrupt Chinese families and buying them up; dealing in art, antiques and furniture; marrying, divorcing and carrying on--the See family’s adventures would be incredible if *On Gold Mountain* were fiction,” proclaimed Elizabeth Tallent in the New York Times Book Review.

The “diversity” in “deal[ing] with a great number of individuals and a time span of over 100 years . . . [and a] unique crosscurrents of cultural and ethnic diversity. . . . sets [Kendall]’s saga apart from other excellent family histories of Asian immigrants. . . . Throughout the lengthy and complicated account the reader is carried along effortlessly by the author’s skillful and absolutely convincing invocation of the fears, joys, loves, hatreds, strengths and weaknesses of her remarkable progenitors,” praised Snyder, who superficially faulted the book for not editing some “duplications of information” and for a lack of “family photographs.” Tallant cautioned, however: “[Kendall]’s handling of her characters’ emotional lives on occasion [Kendall] seems downright fatigued.” Regardless, Kendall, a “clear-eyed biographer” did “a gallant and fair-minded job of fashioning anecdote, fable and fact into an engaging account,” recognized Tallant. *On Gold Mountain* is a “lovingly rendered dynastic saga,” applauded Pam Lambert in *People Weekly*, concluding: “Deeply felt, [Kendall’s] story of culture and assimilation would likely make her ancestors proud.”

“The complexity of [Kendall’s] own background” is credited by Paula Friedman in the Los Angeles Times Book Review for “the graceful rendering of two different and complex cultures, within [the] highly intricate plot” of *Flower Net*, a “novel of political conspiracy and family betrayal.” Kendall’s debut mystery, presents “a workman-like job with . . . plot and paints a vivid portrait of a vast Communist nation in the painful throes of a sea change,” stated a *People Weekly* review. Critics applauded Kendall’s portrayal of Beijing and characterization of Liu Halan, a female detective with the Ministry of Public Security in

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Beijing. Hulan is paired with her love interest of a decade earlier, David Starke, an assistant U.S. Attorney. The team bridges countries, and rekindles romance, when investigating an apparent serial killer whose latest two victims were recently discovered. The body of a powerful Chinese businessman's son was found in U.S. territory and the body of a U.S. ambassador's son was found frozen in a Beijing lake. "True to [Kendall]'s predilection for doubling throughout this novel, when Hulan and David do reach the end of their investigation, they find two interdependent solutions. One is so sensationally evil, its hard to swallow; the other is quietly appalling," declared Washington Post Book World contributor Maureen Corrigan.

"All and all," recognized Krist, "[ Flower Net has] an inviting premise for a thriller . . . capitalizes on its inherent novelty and exoticism. . . [and has] delight[ful] . . . local descriptions [of Beijing]. . . but when it comes to plotting, [Kendall] unfortunately adopts the old policy of letting a hundred improbabilities bloom. . . [and there is] a nagging aura of inauthenticity hang[ing] over the novel's investigative mechanics." In the novel, "paradox and contradiction are enmeshed in increasingly ambiguous scenarios that are about as tough to sort out as any 1,000-piece jigsaw puzzle. Following the crisscrossing narrative that moves from China to Los Angeles and back again, the reader quickly begins to feel trapped in a hall of mirrors," contended Friedman.

Of the detective pair, Gary Krist wrote in the New York Times Book Review: "Although Stark is constructed largely from crime-novel boiler plate . . . Hulan is a provocative mixture of vulnerability, bitterness and hardheaded practicality." Calling Hulan an "intriguing, if not fully fleshed out, character," Corrigan asserted: "David may have the muscle, but Hulan has the moxie." With Hulan, declared USA Today reviewer Deirdre Donahue, Kendall has "[successfully and] compellingly" created a "woman far more tough-minded than the man." Praising the novel, Corrigan contended that "if . . . you have a strong stomach and an appreciation for atmospheric, tightly plotted suspense stories, Flower Net is a treat." This "nifty tale of suspense" presents "colorful observations of Chinese life . . . seamlessly combined with basic suspense elements," lauded Chicago Tribune contributor Chris Petrako, calling Kendall "a writer comfortable with imaginative storytelling and the sweep of history."

Kendall once told CA: "It's a rare day when I don't ponder that the West Coast (especially Southern California, the second-largest book market) isn't adequately represented in the media or seriously considered by the power brokers in the East. There is power, talent, and money out here, and except for the movie business, little connection is made between the East Coast publishing business and the extraordinary cache of West Coast energy."

### **PERSONAL INFORMATION**

Born February 18, 1955, in Paris, France; daughter of Richard Edward (an anthropologist) and Carolyn (a novelist; maiden name, Laws) See; married Richard Becker Kendall (an attorney) July 18, 1981; children: Alexander See Kendall, Christopher Copeland Kendall. Education: Received certificate from Institute for Balkan Studies in Greece, 1978; Loyola Marymount University, B.A., 1979. Avocational Interests: Travel (including Mexico and Greece), tennis, Mexican folkloric dance. Memberships: American Society of Journalists and Authors, Writers Guild of America, West, PEN (judge). Addresses: Homeoffice: 17975 Porto

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Marina Way, Pacific Palisades, CA 90272. Agent: Elaine Markson, 44 Greenwich Ave., New York, NY 10011.

### **AWARDS**

Proclamation from City of Los Angeles and Long Beach Literary Hall of Fame Award, both 1983, both for Lotus Land.

### **CAREER**

Triad Graphic Workshop, Los Angeles, CA, printer and in sales and public relations, 1973-75; Sun Institute, Los Angeles, event coordinator, 1977-78; freelance writer, 1979--; event coordinator for Loyola Marymount Writers Conference, 1980--. Vice-president of Kendall Restaurant Corp.

### **WRITINGS**

WITH MOTHER, CAROLYN SEE, AND JOHN ESPEY UNDER JOINT PSEUDONYM MONICA HIGHLAND

- Lotus Land (novel), Coward-McCann (New York City), 1983.
- 110 Shanghai Road, McGraw-Hill (New York City), 1986.
- Greetings from Southern California (nonfiction), Graphic Arts Center Publishing (Portland, OR), 1988.

UNDER PSEUDONYM LISA SEE

- (Author of text) A Day in the Life of Hawaii, Workman Publishing, 1984.
- On Gold Mountain Mountains: The One-Hundred-Year Odyssey of My Chinese-American Family (autobiography), St. Martins (New York City), 1995.
- Flower Net (mystery), HarperCollins (New York City), 1997.
- The Interior, HarperCollins, 1999.
- Dragon Bones (novel), Random House (New York, NY), 2003.
- Snow Flower and the Secret Fan, Random House (New York, NY), 2005.

OTHER

- Contributor of articles to TV Guide, USA Today, Los Angeles Times Magazine, New West, Dynamic Years, City Kids, Emmy, Forum, Today, Sporting Times, Women's Sports, LA Weekly, and Twin Circle. Western correspondent for Publishers Weekly, 1980--.

MEDIA ADAPTATIONS

Lotus Land and 110 Shanghai Road have been optioned for television miniseries.



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**FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

PERIODICALS

- Boston Globe, November 2, 1997.
- Chicago Tribune, October 12, 1997.
- Economist, December 13, 1997.
- Los Angeles Times Book Review, March 20, 1983; July 13, 1986; July 23, 1995; November 17, 1996; September 28, 1997.
- Los Angeles Times, November 13, 1997.
- New York Times, August 17, 1995.
- New York Times Book Review, August 27, 1995; October 26, 1997.
- People Weekly, November 20, 1995; November 3, 1997.
- Publishers Weekly, February 4, 1983; June 5, 1995; October 30, 1995; July 21, 1997; September 1, 1997.
- School Library Journal, January, 1996; April, 1998.
- USA Today, July 19, 1983; October 30, 1997.
- Virginia Quarterly Review, winter, 1996.
- Washington Post Book World, March 6, 1983; July 28, 1986; August 31, 1986; August 2, 1987; August 20, 1995; September 21, 1997.

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