
Snow Flower and the Secret Fan by Lisa See

From Publishers Weekly

Starred Review. See's engrossing novel set in remote 19th-century China details the deeply affecting story of lifelong, intimate friends (laotong, or "old sames") Lily and Snow Flower, their imprisonment by rigid codes of conduct for women and their betrayal by pride and love. While granting immediacy to Lily's voice, See (Flower Net) adroitly transmits historical background in graceful prose. Her in-depth research into women's ceremonies and duties in China's rural interior brings fascinating revelations about arranged marriages, women's inferior status in both their natal and married homes, and the Confucian proverbs and myriad superstitions that informed daily life. Beginning with a detailed and heartbreaking description of Lily and her sisters' foot binding ("Only through pain will you have beauty. Only through suffering will you have peace"), the story widens to a vivid portrait of family and village life. Most impressive is See's incorporation of nu shu, a secret written phonetic code among women—here between Lily and Snow Flower—that dates back 1,000 years in the southwestern Hunan province ("My writing is soaked with the tears of my heart,/ An invisible rebellion that no man can see"). As both a suspenseful and poignant story and an absorbing historical chronicle, this novel has bestseller potential and should become a reading group favorite as well.

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From 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.
Kristine Huntley

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