Shanghai Girls
by Lisa See

About the Book

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.

Praise for the Book

"A buoyant and lustrous paean to the bonds of sisterhood."

–Booklist

"A rich work…as compulsively readable as it is an enlightening journey."

—Denver Post

Courtesy of Random House

About the Author

Title: Lisa See
Known As: Kendall, Lisa See; See, Lisa
American Novelist (1955 -)
Source: *Contemporary Authors Online*. Detroit: Gale, 2011. From *Literature Resource Center*.
Document Type: Biography
Full Text: COPYRIGHT 2012 Gale, Cengage Learning
Updated:09/01/2011

PERSONAL INFORMATION:

Born February 18, 1955, in Paris, France; daughter of Richard Edward (an anthropologist) and Carolyn (a novelist) 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: Pacific Palisades, CA. Agent: Elaine Markson, 44 Greenwich Ave., New York, NY 10011. E-mail: writersee@aol.com.

CAREER:

Writer. 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.; Los Angeles City Commissioner on the El Pueblo de Los Angeles Monument Authority.

AWARDS:

Proclamation from City of Los Angeles and Long Beach Literary Hall of Fame Award, both 1983, both for *Lotus Land;* National Woman of the Year, the Organization of Chinese American Women, 2001; History Makers Award, Chinese American Museum, 2003.

WORKS:

WRITINGS:

- (Author of text) *A Day in the Life of Hawaii,* Workman Publishing (New York, NY), 1984.
- *On Gold Mountain: The One-hundred-year Odyssey of My Chinese-American Family* (autobiography), St. Martin's Press (New York, NY), 1995.
- *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* (novel), Random House (New York, NY), 2005.
- (As Lisa See) *Peony in Love* (novel), Random House (New York, NY), 2007.
- *Shanghai Girls* (novel), Random House (New York, NY), 2009.

"HULAN AND STARK" MYSTERY SERIES

- *Flower Net,* HarperCollins (New York, NY), 1997.
- *The Interior,* HarperCollins (New York, NY), 1999.
- *Dragon Bones,* Random House (New York, NY), 2003.

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

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

Contributor to book *Half + Half.* 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. The film *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan,* adapted from See's novel, was released by Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2011.

Sidelights

Lisa See, who has published with her 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."

See, one-eighth Chinese, presents more than her own life story in her autobiography *On Gold Mountain: 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 the 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 one hundred years ... [and] unique crosscurrents of cultural and ethnic diversity ... sets [See'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." Tallent cautioned, however, that in the "handling of her characters' emotional lives on occasion [See] seems downright fatigued." Regardless, See, a "clear-eyed biographer," did "a gallant and fair-minded job of fashioning anecdote, fable and fact into an engaging account," recognized Tallent. *On Gold Mountain* is a "lovingly rendered dynastic saga," applauded Pam Lambert in *People,* concluding: "Deeply felt, [See's] story of culture and assimilation would likely make her ancestors proud."

"The complexity of [See'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." See'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* reviewer. Critics applauded See's portrayal of Beijing and characterization of Liu Hulan, a female detective with the Ministry of Public Security in Beijing. Hulan is paired with her love interest of a decade earlier, David Stark, 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 [See]'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 *New York Times Book Review* contributor Gary Krist, "[*Flower Net* has] an inviting premise for a thriller ... [and] capitalizes on its inherent novelty and exoticism ... but when it comes to plotting, [See] 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, Krist wrote: "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, See has "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 ... seemlessly combined with basic suspense elements," lauded *Chicago Tribune* contributor Chris Petrako, calling See "a writer comfortable with imaginative storytelling and the sweep of history."

The Interior is See's second mystery novel featuring American lawyer Stark and Chinese police detective Hulan, published in 1999. This time the lovers set off on a case involving an American-owned toy factory in rural China after Hulan's old friend Ling Suchee's daughter dies there. Hulan goes undercover in the factory and uncovers conditions where women are treated like slaves, and possibly even murdered. In See's third mystery novel, 2003's *Dragon Bones*, Hulan and Stark are back at it again. The duo is married now and drifting apart after the death of their young daughter, who contracted meningitis. Hoping to bring the couple back together, Hulan's superior at the Ministry of Public Security sends her and Stark to the Three Gorges to investigate the death of an archaeologist who may have stolen ancient artifacts from the dam site. As they begin to repair their relationship, more fatalities occur. Although *Booklist* reviewer Carrie Bissey criticized the novel for being "wordy" and having dialogue that is "a bit stilted," she also noted that the information about historical and modern-day China conveyed in the novel "makes it worthwhile." She further commended the book for having a plot that "is convoluted but fascinating." The author "succeeds in widening the reader's knowledge about the politics and culture of contemporary China while racing along with an absorbing story," observed a *Publishers Weekly* reviewer. *Library Journal* contributor Nanci Milone Hill mentioned

that *Dragon Bones* "flows beautifully, engaging readers in the mystery while gently introducing them to China's rich cultural history."

Veering away from the mystery genre, See's 2005 novel, *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan,* takes readers to nineteenth-century China to explore the long-standing friendship between two women, Lily and Snow Flower, who, despite their strikingly different backgrounds, were brought together by the tradition of arranged friendships known as laotong. Over the years, the two exchange messages in nu shu (a secret language known only to women), writing of their mutual devotion on a fan they pass between each other. The laotong bonds of the two persevere through several family tragedies, a typhoid-fever epidemic, and the Taiping Rebellion of 1851-64. But a misunderstood message in nu shu, the secret language that facilitated their bond, in the end, tears their friendship apart. For this book, See traveled to a remote area of China, supposedly only the second foreigner ever to visit there, to research nu shu, the secret writing invented, used, and kept a secret by women for over a thousand years. Her "meticulous research and exquisite language deliver a story that is haunting, powerful, and, at times, almost too painful to bear," remarked Beth E. Andersen in her review of the novel for *Library Journal. Booklist* reviewer Kristine Huntley remarked that in this book the author's "writing is intricate and graceful, and her attention to detail never wavers, making for a lush, involving reading experience." "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," lauded a *Kirkus Reviews,* critic.

See's follow-up to *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan,* 2007's *Peony in Love,* explores the true-life phenomenon of lovesick Chinese maidens. Privileged but repressed, these girls fell under the spell of the romantic opera *The Peony Pavilion* and let themselves waste away in the name of love. The opera, debuting in 1598, tells the story of Liniang, a young woman who meets her true love in a dream and wakes up so lovesick that she dies of a broken heart. Her lover eventually brings her back to life. "These girls were living more or less totally confined lives," said See in an interview with *BookPage* Web site contributor Amy Scribner. "They never met their husbands. A lot of them never went out. They thought that in emulating Liniang, maybe they, too, would have some choice in their lives. Maybe true love would bring them back to life." Set in seventeenth-century China, the book's main character, Peony, meets her soulmate during a forbidden late-night walk on the outskirts of her family villa during a local production of *The Peony Pavilion.* Already promised in marriage, she mourns for her true love by embarking on the same dark path as the opera's heroine. In a cruel twist of fate, Peony discovers as she is dying that the man she met that night and fell in love with is also the man she was supposed to marry. "Peony's vibrant voice, perfectly pitched between the novel's historical and passionate depths, carries her story beautifully--in life and afterlife," observed a *Publishers Weekly* reviewer.

See 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."

FURTHER READINGS:

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

PERIODICALS

- *Booklist,* September 15, 1999, Jenny McLarin, review of *The Interior,* p. 238; March 15, 2003, Carrie Bissey, review of *Dragon Bones,* p. 1281; July, 2005, Kristine Huntley, review of *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan,* p. 1901; May 15, 2007, Elizabeth Dickie, review of *Peony in Love,* p. 21.
- *Books,* August 13, 2006, Petra Nelson, review of *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan,* p. 6; June 2, 2007, Kristin Kloberdanz, review of *Peony in Love,* p. 8; July 21, 2007, "Timeless Love: Lisa See's Historical Novel Transports Readers to Places Real and Otherworldly," p. 9.
- *Book World,* June 26, 2005, "Scripted in the Shadows," p. 6; June 24, 2007, "Ghosts in the Garden," p. 6.
- *Chicago Tribune,* October 12, 1997, Chris Petrako, review of *Flower Net.*
- *Detroit Free Press,* July 6, 2005, review of *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan.*
- *Drood Review of Mystery,* July, 2000, review of *The Interior,* p. 21.
- *Entertainment Weekly,* June 24, 2005, Jennifer Reese, review of *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan,* p. 170.
- *Financial Times,* November 3, 2007, Sarah Beldo, review of *Peony in Love,* p. 43.
- *Fort Worth Star-Telegram,* June 27, 2007, review of *Peony in Love.*
- *Houston Chronicle,* July 8, 2007, "Lovesick in 17th-century China; in Lisa See's Romantic, Suspenseful Novel, a Cloistered Girl Falls under the Spell of a Scandalous Opera," p. 14.
- *Kirkus Reviews,* March 15, 2003, review of *Dragon Bones,* p. 425; April 15, 2005, review of *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan,* p. 447; May 15, 2007, review of *Peony in Love.*
- *Kliatt,* March, 2005, Janet Julian, review of *Dragon Bones,* p. 52.
- *Library Journal,* July 16, 1986, Patricia Altner, review of *110 Shanghai Road,* p. 108; August, 2000, Lora Bruggeman, review of *The Interior,* p. 192; May 15, 2003, Nanci Milone Hill, review of *Dragon Bones,* p. 127; June 1, 2005, Beth E. Andersen, review of *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan,* p. 122; May 15, 2007, Beth E. Andersen, review of *Peony in Love,* p. 84.
- *Los Angeles Magazine,* May, 1983, Tom Link, review of *Lotus Land,* p. 52; July, 2007, Robert Ito, review of *Peony in Love,* p. 82.
- *Los Angeles Times Book Review,* July 23, 1995, Zilpha Keatley Snyder, review of *On Gold Mountain: The One-hundred-year Odyssey of My Chinese-American Family;* September 28, 1997, Paula Friedman, review of *Flower Net.*

- *New York Times Book Review,* August 27, 1995, Elizabeth Tallent, review of *On Gold Mountain;* October 26, 1997, Gary Krist, review of *Flower Net,* p. 14; July 22, 2007, "Dead Flowers," p. 20.
- *People,* November 20, 1995, Pam Lambert, review of *On Gold Mountain,* p. 32; November 3, 1997, review of *Flower Net,* p. 38.
- *Publishers Weekly,* May 30, 1986, Sybil Steinberg, review of *110 Shanghai Road,* p. 53; August 9, 1999, review of *The Interior,* p. 338; March 24, 2003, review of *Dragon Bones,* p. 55; April 18, 2005, review of *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan,* p. 40; April 23, 2007, review of *Peony in Love,* p. 27.
- *School Library Journal,* October, 2003, Judy McAloon, review of *Dragon Bones,* p. 208; September, 2005, Molly Connally, review of *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan,* p. 245.
- *USA Today,* October 30, 1997, Deirdre Donahue, review of *Flower Net;* July 14, 2005, Susan Kelly, review of *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan,* p. 7; July 3, 2007, review of *Peony in Love,* p. 7.
- *Virginia Quarterly Review,* fall, 2005, Tiffany N. Gilbert, review of *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan.*
- *Washington Post Book World,* September 21, 1997, Maureen Corrigan, review of *Flower Net;* June 26, 2007, "Book World Live; a Young Woman in 17th-century China Returns after Death to Fulfill Her Destiny."
- *Weekend Edition Sunday,* July 1, 2007, review of *Peony in Love.*

ONLINE

- *BookPage,* http://www.bookpage.com/ (February 17, 2008), Amy Scribner, "Siren Song."
- *Lisa See Home Page,* http://www.lisasee.com (February 17, 2008).
- *Mostly Fiction,* http://www.mostlyfiction.com/ (September 3, 2007), Amanda Richards, review of *Peony in Love.**

Source Citation

"Lisa See." *Contemporary Authors Online*. Detroit: Gale, 2011. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 11 Jan. 2012.

Document URL

http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CH1000053251&v=2.1&u=lom_kentdl&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w

Gale Document Number: GALE|H1000053251

Author Interview

What inspired you to write Shanghai Girls?

Four things, really. 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. They'd had servants in China, but they lived like servants in America.) Third, I wanted to write about China City, a short-lived tourist attraction in Los Angeles. And finally, I wanted to write about sisters.

What is it about Shanghai that so captures the imagination?

In part it's the juxtaposition of extreme opposites—dire poverty amidst flamboyant wealth, upstanding English gentlemen going to the same nightclubs as the most corrupt gangsters, the lowest prostitutes plying Blood Alley competing, in a sense, with the Beautiful Girls who graced magazine covers—that is somehow delicious and sinful, like having a big juicy hamburger with glass of champagne. In the 1930s, Shanghai—the Paris of Asia—was one of the world's most modern cities. It was glamorous. It was fun. It was a place where everything seemed possible, and, in fact, was possible. And, of course, that entrancing moment was about to end, which also adds to its appeal.

The Japanese invasion in 1937 was the beginning of Shanghai's fall. The Sino-Japanese War melded into World War II, which was followed almost immediately by civil war. When Mao took over the country in 1949, Shanghai's nightclubs were closed, beautiful clothes were put away, and street vendors and all their tasty treats almost entirely eliminated. Writers and intellectuals were sent to the countryside, labor camps, or executed. Artists were forced to follow new precepts that said art must be subservient to politics and communicate political and social messages about Communist ideology. Years ago, during my first trip to Shanghai, I saw art-deco buildings, marble lobbies, and ornate villas wrapped in a world gone grey. Communism had mummified the once enchanting city. But as May and Pearl might say, everything returns to the beginning. Now, in the 21st century, Shanghai has reclaimed its status as the Paris of Asia and is once again considered not just one of the great cities in the world but a true economic powerhouse.

Everyone knows about Ellis Island, but many people have never heard of Angel Island. What is it? And what was it like for the immigrants who passed through it?

Angel Island, in the San Francisco Bay, is often referred to as the Ellis Island of the West. The Angel Island Immigration Station operated from 1910 to1940. Over one million immigrants from eighty countries passed through the station, of which 175,000 were Chinese. We think of Ellis Island as a welcoming place, the gateway to a new life in America, with the Statue of Liberty in view. But Angel Island was far from welcoming. It was designed to be a barrier to Chinese immigration, which is why it was often referred to the Guardian of the Western Gate. At Ellis Island, immigrants were asked twenty-nine standard questions; at Angel Island, Chinese detainees were subjected to between two hundred and over one thousand questions. Some Chinese immigrants stayed as little as a few days; some stayed for two years. Many were deported and many committed suicide.

Did any of your relatives go through Angel Island?

At the National Archives, I found over 500 pages of interrogations, photographs, boarding passes, and health certificates related to my family members who passed through Angel Island. I've also heard many stories from people in my family, as well as from family friends, about their experiences at Angel Island. Pearl's interrogations in Shanghai Girls are pulled directly from the hearing transcripts for Mrs. Fong Lai (Jung-shee), the wife of one of my great-grandfather's paper partners, and for my great-grandfather and his brother.

What's Angel Island like today? Have you ever visited?

In addition to the Immigration Station, the island also has a garrison dating from the Civil War, a fort that was active during the Spanish-American War, a quarantine station, a World War II staging facility, and a Nike missile site. Today people love to take the ferry to the island to picnic, hike, and bike.

The Immigration Station itself was closed to the public for several years for an extensive renovation and conservation project. (It opened to the public again in February 2009.) In 2008, I was invited on a private tour of the station. I have never questioned for a moment how brave people were—and still are—to leave their home countries to come to the United States, but I cannot express how deeply I was affected by wandering through the dormitory and strolling the grounds, where my own relatives were held and interrogated. The conservators have done a wonderful job with the barracks in particular. It's amazing to see the lines of poetry—kind of like graffiti—that Chinese and other immigrants left on the walls. They speak of homesickness, hope, yearning, loneliness, and bitterness at being treated so badly. For example:

What can one person say to another?

Unfortunate travelers everywhere wish to commiserate.

Gain or lose, how is one to know what is predestined?

Rich or poor, who is to say it is not the will of heaven?

Why should one complain if he is detained and imprisoned here?

From ancient times heroes often were the first to face adversity.

What were paper sons?

The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 barred the immigration of all Chinese, except for diplomats, ministers, students, merchants, and those who were the sons and daughters of Chinese-American citizens. (If you're an American citizen and you have a child in another country, then that child is also an American citizen.) But Chinese weren't allowed to become naturalized citizens until 1943, so how could they possibly enter the country as American citizens before that? During the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, all birth records for California were destroyed. Suddenly those Chinese, who were already here, could state that they'd been born here—because there was no documentation to prove them wrong (or right)—and thus claim citizenship by having been born on American soil. So when a Chinese man—whether an actual U.S. citizen or one claiming false citizenship—went back to China, he could report that his wife had given birth to a son in the village. He would receive a certificate stating that he had an American-citizen son, which he could then sell to a total stranger—but often a nephew or friend of the family—and then bring him to America as a citizen.

Obviously, a lot of secrecy surrounded paper sons. One mistake could cause not just one person to be deported but a whole family, friends, and business associates to be deported too. The fear of being caught has never gone away. When I was working on On Gold Mountain, in the early 1990s, several people in my family told me they didn't want to be interviewed because they were still afraid they might be deported back to China. Even now families don't tell the second, third, or even fourth generations about the origins of their citizenship status. Two years ago, a young man wrote to me asking why his grandparents didn't treat his father and him the same way they treated their other children and grandchildren. I hinted that his father might be a paper son. It turned out I was right. When I met the young man a few nights later, he was devastated. The people he thought were his family were not related to him at all. Everything he thought he knew about his grandparents, his parents, his uncles and aunts, and his cousins was a lie.

Shanghai Girls is one of the few novels to tackle the Confession Program. Even today great secrecy surrounds the Confession Program. What was it, how did you get people to talk about it, and what did you learn?

The Confession Program ran from 1956 to 1965. The government asked Chinese to "confess" their paper-son status. They were also encouraged to reveal the people they knew in their own families—fathers, sons, brothers, wives—that they knew had come in using false status. But it didn't stop there. People were also asked to name neighbors, business associates, and anyone else they suspected might be a Communist. By the time the program ended, 13,895 people had confessed, exposing 22,083 others. Considering that the Chinese-American population in the United States (without Hawaii) in 1950 was only 117,629, the effects on people and families were far-reaching. The program caused, among other things, a retraction from assimilation and American politics.

If people are still nervous about revealing paper-son status in their family trees, then they're far more anxious and secretive when it comes to the Confession Program. The Confession Program is still considered a terrible secret and disgrace, not only by those who confessed or were ratted out but by our own government too. During one of the interviews for this book, I was told, "There were a lot of suicides, a lot of suicides. It's hard to remember these things because of the pain." Another person said, "I don't know that we've ever mentioned any of this to our kids." He then added, "We aren't dead yet, so we aren't safe yet."

What was China City exactly?

China City was a tourist attraction developed by Christine Sterling, who also developed Olvera Street, a Mexican marketplace here in Los Angeles. Mrs. Sterling started both of these projects during the Depression as a way to give poor immigrants a chance to start small businesses. Chinese City was intended to look and feel like an "authentic" Chinese city. It was one square block surrounded by a miniature Great Wall. Inside it was built from the leftover sets from the filming of The Good Earth. The people who worked there were required to wear Chinese costumes. Those who came to visit rode in rickshaws and nibbled on Chinaburgers. China City was also home to the Asiastic Costume Company, where movie studios rented props and costumes, and also hired Chinese extras to work in films. I think it's safe to say that China City wasn't terribly authentic, but it did have a lot of charm. And it's really lived on in the memories of the people who worked there. My great-great-uncle had a shop there. His children—my cousins—have wonderful memories of playing and working in China City.

You focus on close friendships between women in all your books. You wrote about the lao tong relationship in Snow Flower and the Secret Fan; you wrote about so-called sister-wives in Peony in Love. This time you've written about sisters. What's the difference between a relationship that's "just like sisters" and real sisters?

It is said that the sibling relationship is the longest we will have in our lifetimes. A sister is the person who should stand by you, support you, and love you no matter what. And yet your sister also knows exactly where to drive the knife to hurt you the most. I think the biggest difference between sisters and best friends who are like sisters is that actual sisters are for life. You share the same experiences growing up. You share the same family secrets. You protect and defend each other. Much later, you watch your parents grow old and die. This links us in ways that we just don't have with a friend. That doesn't mean the sister relationship is always easy or fun. Far from it! But blood is thicker than water, and the closer we are, the more we experience together, the more fraught and difficult the emotional relationship, the more grudges and hard feelings we harbor, the more we actually come to rely on and trust each other. As I said earlier, sisters are for life, and that leads to some interesting dynamics that can play out over many decades.

It sounds like some of Shanghai Girls comes from your own experiences. Is this where the emotional heart of the novel comes from?

Absolutely. I'm a sister myself, so there's that. (There are some arguments and silly feuds between Pearl and May in the novel that really made my sisters laugh when they read them. We lived some of those things!) But with Shanghai Girls I also wanted to capture the people (and places) who are gone now, who meant so much to me, who in so many ways made me the person I am today. When I was a girl, I lived with my mother, but I spent a lot of time with my paternal grandparents and my great-aunts and great-uncles in our family's antiques store in Los Angeles Chinatown. The F. Suie One Company was located in a building that had once been part of China City. Two stone lions guarded the store's moon gate. Every morning my grandfather used to roll a rickshaw upholstered in purple velvet to the curb to entice customers to enter. Inside the store, there were upturned eaves, hidden nooks, and a room that held the remnants of China City's wishing well. In 1981, the family store moved to Pasadena, where it is still in operation. Several years later, the old China City building was torn down. Since then, many of the other stores and cafés along Spring Street have also been closed and the people have moved or died. The same thing is happening now in New Chinatown—the old curio shops are being replaced by trendy art galleries, the pioneer Chinese-American families are being replaced by hipsters. Writing about the past allows me to be with the people and places I loved so much as a girl a little while longer.

Courtesy Author's Website retrieved February 2,2010, from
http://www.lisasee.com/shanghaigirls/shanghaiquestions.php

Discussion Questions

1. Pearl's narration is unique because of its level, calm tone throughout – even when the events she describes are horrific. One is reminded of Wordsworth's reference to "emotion recollected in tranquility." It is almost as if Pearl is writing in a diary. What was Lisa trying to accomplish in setting up this counterpoint between her tone and her narrative?

2. Pearl is a Dragon and May is a Sheep. Do you think the two sisters are true to their birth signs in their actions in Shanghai Girls?

3. Which sister is smarter? Which is more beautiful?

4. Each sister believes that her parents loved the other sister more. Who is right about this? Why?

5. Pearl says that parents die, husbands and children can leave, but sisters are for life. Does that end up being true for Pearl? If you have a sister, to what extent does the relationship between Pearl and May speak to your own experience? What's the difference between a relationship that's "just like sisters" and real sisters? Is there anything your sister could do that would cause an irreparable breach?

6. Z.G. talks about ai kuo, the love for your country, and ai jen, the emotion you feel for the person you love. How do these ideas play out in the novel?

7. Shanghai Girls makes a powerful statement about the mistreatment of Chinese immigrants to the United States. Were you surprised about any of the details related to this theme in the novel?

8. How would you describe the relationship between Pearl and May? How does the fact that both are, in a sense, Joy's mother affect their relationship toward each other? Who loves Joy more and how does she show it?

9. Pearl doesn't come to mother love easily or naturally. At what point does she begin to claim Joy as her own? How, where, and why does she continue to struggle with the challenges of being a mother? Do you think this is an accurate portrayal of motherhood?

10. There are times when it seems like outside forces conspire against Pearl—leaving China, working in the restaurant, not looking for a job after the war, and taking care of Vern. How much of what happens to Pearl is a product of her own decisions and choices?

11. Pearl's attitude toward men and the world in general is influenced by what happened to her in the shack outside Shanghai. To what extent does she find her way to healing by the end of the novel? Did your attitude toward Old Man Louie change? How do you feel about Sam and his relationship with Pearl and Joy? Did your impression of him change as the novel progressed?

12. The novel begins with Pearl saying, "I am not a person of importance." After Yen-yen dies, Pearl comments: "Her funeral is small. After all, she was not a person of importance, rather just a wife and mother." How do you react to comments like these?

13. Speaking of Yen-yen, Pearl notes: "When we're packing, Yen-yen says she's tired. She sits down on the couch in the main room and dies." Why does Pearl describe Yen-yen's death in such an abrupt way?

14. After Joy points out the differences in the way Z.G. painted her mother and aunt in the Communist propaganda posters, May says, "Everything always returns to the beginning." Pearl has her idea of what May meant, but what do you think May really meant? And what is Pearl's understanding of this saying at the end of the novel?

15. Near the end of Shanghai Girls, May argues that Pearl and Sam have withdrawn into a world of fear and isolation, not taking advantage of the opportunities open to them. Do you agree with May that much of Pearl's sadness and isolation is self-imposed? Why or why not?

16. How do clothes define Pearl and May in different parts of the story? How do the sisters use clothes to manipulate others?

17. How does food serve as a gateway to memory in the novel? How does it illustrate culture and tradition both in the novel and in your own families?

18. What influence—if any—do Mama's beliefs have on Pearl? How do they evolve over time?

19. Pearl encounters a lot of racism, but she also holds many racist views herself. Is she a product of her time? Do her attitudes change during the course of the story?

20. What role does place—Shanghai, Angel Island, China City, and Chinatown—serve in the novel? What do you think Lisa was trying to say about "home"?

Courtesy Author's Website retrieved February 2,2010, from http://www.lisasee.com/shanghaigirls/shanghaibookclub.php