

# **Snow Flower and the Secret Fan**

by Lisa See

## About the Book

In nineteenth-century China, in a remote Hunan county, a girl named Lily, at the tender age of seven, is paired with a laotong, “old same,” in an emotional match that will last a lifetime. The laotong, Snow Flower, introduces herself by sending Lily a silk fan on which she’s painted a poem in nu shu, a unique language that Chinese women created in order to communicate in secret, away from the influence of men. As the years pass, Lily and Snow Flower send messages on fans, compose stories on handkerchiefs, reaching out of isolation to share their hopes, dreams, and accomplishments. Together, they endure the agony of foot-binding, and reflect upon their arranged marriages, shared loneliness, and the joys and tragedies of motherhood. The two find solace, developing a bond that keeps their spirits alive. But when a misunderstanding arises, their deep friendship suddenly threatens to tear apart.

## Praise for the Book

“Powerfully alive, unfolding like a waking dream, haunting, magical, and absolutely impossible to forget.”

— *The Boston Globe*

“[A] marvelous narrative. . . . A timeless portrait of a contentious, full-blooded female friendship.”

— *Entertainment Weekly* (editor’s choice)

“Vivid. . . . See’s translucent prose style gleams with the beauty of nineteenth-century Chinese culture.”

— *Los Angeles Times*

“An achingly beautiful, understated and absorbing story of love. . . . [*Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*] evokes the work of Jane Austen.”

— *Cleveland Plain Dealer*

“A triumph on every level, a beautiful, heartbreaking story.”

— *The Washington Post Book World*

*Courtesy of Random House*

## About the Author

Title: Lisa See

Known As: Kendall, Lisa See; See, Lisa

American Novelist ( 1955 - )

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### 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 ... seamlessly 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 Suche'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*.\*

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## Author Interview

### **Q: What is your educational background?**

**Lisa See:** I went to Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles. I started out as an art history major, but I graduated with a B.A. in the Humanities. I ended up creating my own major, which was Modern Greek Studies. On the surface it would seem like that wouldn't have helped me much as a writer, but actually it did. I learned the pleasures and surprises of research, which are at the heart of all of my books.

### **Q: Where do you live? Do you have a family?**

**LS:** I live in Brentwood, California. (Yep, that's right, of O.J. Simpson fame.) I'm married. My husband is an attorney. I have two sons. Alexander is working in Boston. Christopher is a student at Stanford. These three men are the greatest joys of my life.

### **Q: Did you have a favorite teacher?**

**LS:** I had two. The first was Mrs. Bruinslot, my fifth grade teacher at Topanga Canyon Elementary School. She was a wild and fiery old dame. She loved history and she made it come alive by talking about the quiriness of each individual person instead of the usual recitation of dates, wars, presidents, and kings. She taught me that history is something that happens to individual people. I used that idea with *On Gold Mountain*, the mysteries, and now *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*.

The other great teacher in my life is my mom, Carolyn See, who's a wonderful and much beloved writer. She is the most incredible person, truly! She taught me to write a thousand words a day, stay focused, not get dragged down by the negativity in the publishing business, and to have fun. If you can't have fun writing, then what's the point?

### **Q: How and when did you decide to become a writer?**

**LS:** I knew three things about myself when I was growing up. I never wanted to get married, I didn't want to have children, and I always wanted to live out of a suitcase. I took two years off from college to travel in Europe. The whole time I was wondering how I was going to make my life work the way I envisioned it and how I would be able to afford it. One morning, when I was living in Greece, I woke up and it was like a cartoon light bulb had gone off in my head. I thought, *Oh, I could be a writer!* But clearly I didn't know myself very well, because I got married and had children. I still spend an awful lot of time living out of a suitcase though!

**Q: Why do you write about China?**

**LS:** I'm part Chinese. My great-great-grandfather came here to work on the building of the transcontinental railroad. My great-grandfather was the godfather/patriarch of Los Angeles Chinatown. I don't look at all Chinese, but I grew up in a very large Chinese-American family. I have hundreds of relatives in Los Angeles, of which there are only about a dozen that look like me.

All writers are told to write what they know. My family is what I know. And what I don't know — *nu shu*, for example — I love to find out whatever I can and then bring my sensibility to the subject. I guess what I'm trying to say is that in many ways I straddle two cultures. I try to bring what I know from both cultures into my work. The American side of me tries to open a window into China and things Chinese for non-Chinese, while the Chinese side of me makes sure that what I'm writing is true to the Chinese culture without making it seem too “exotic” or “foreign.” What I want people to get from my books is that all people on the planet share common life experiences — falling in love, getting married, having children, dying — and share common emotions — love, hate, greed, jealousy. These are the universals; the differences are in the particulars of customs and culture.

**Q: What's your writing process?**

**LS:** I get up early and work on my e-mail for an hour or two. Then I write 1,000 words a day. That's only four pages. Some days I write more, but I try never to write less. I usually have an outline and I write from beginning to end without stopping to edit. Some writers won't move forward until they get one page absolutely perfect, but I think you can spend a lot of time questioning yourself and making things perfect before going on. Also, if you write straight through, you allow magic to happen.

A good example of that was when I was working on *The Interior*. (If you're about to read that book, don't read the rest of this paragraph.) It's a mystery, so a body was discovered up around page three and the identity of the killer and the conspiracy were going to be revealed around page 400. I was working one day — typing and minding my own business — when all of a sudden it turned out the killer was someone completely different than who I'd planned. But I loved the scene. I knew I'd have to go back and add some clues and bits and pieces so that readers wouldn't be upset that the killer had just popped out of nowhere. So I went back to the beginning and there he was in the first scene! In fact, he'd done everything he'd needed to do. That, to me, is the magic of writing and it was something I never could have planned.

**Q: What advice would you give aspiring writers?**

**LS:** Write 1,000 words each day before you do anything else. That's only four pages, but at the end of a week you'll have twenty pages. If you do it first thing in the morning, then you won't get distracted by all the things that tempt you not to write.

So much of writing happens, I think, in the editing process. I tell aspiring writers that they should listen to criticism — whether it's from a teacher or an editor — and then look at it three ways. About a third of all editing suggestions are right, a third are absolutely wrong, and a third are things you have to look at, consider, and play around with.

**Q: What's your favorite all-time book?**

*Ameliaranne and the Magic Ring*, by Eleanor Farjeon. My grandmother picked up this children's book at a thrift store many, many years ago, so it was old and very used when she gave it to me. It's about a little girl who longs to own a special doll from the local toy store but can't possibly afford it. Ameliaranne wins a toy ruby ring from a grab bag run by gypsies. Then she finds out that the old woman who runs the toyshop mistakenly gave her life savings to the gypsies, who also deal in rags. Ameliaranne finds the daughter of the gypsy grab bag/rag dealer and trades her ruby ring for the lost sock with the money. In the end, the old woman gives Ameliaranne the doll as a reward. I loved this story! Then my little sister lost the book.

Spring forward about thirty-five years. My sister did an international search, found a copy on the Internet, and gave it to me for my birthday in 2005. It turns out that while there is an entire series of Ameliaranne books, only 2,000 copies were printed of *Ameliaranne and the Magic Ring*. It's amazing how clearly I had remembered the story and even whole sections of text, but what really struck me was that in many ways I had modeled my life on Ameliaranne. Not only that, the title of *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* bears a striking resemblance to *Ameliaranne and the Magic Ring*. The subconscious works in mysterious ways.

**Q: What types of music do you like? Is there any particular kind you like to listen to when you're writing?**

**LS:** I listen to all types of music — hip hop, Indian tabla, South African township, soundtracks, Mexican jarocho, norteno, and mariachi, everything really. I love the Beach Boys, Jimi Hendrix, Joni Mitchell, Bonnie Raitt, and the Stones — lots of stuff from the sixties; on the other side of the spectrum, I think 50 Cent, OutKast, and Eminem really know how to tell stories and they're funny too. I also love opera. I've learned a lot about storytelling, specifically how to tell a story through the pure emotion of music, through opera. The language is gorgeous too. And I can't help it, but I love Dylan. I realize his voice isn't as melodious as it could be, but I still think the guy's a genius. He can tell an

entire story in just a few minutes. He uses beautiful and interesting words, and I love the cadence and rhythm of his writing.

Words are distracting when I'm writing, so my favorite CDs to work to are "Puccini without Words," which has — obviously — Puccini's opera scores minus the words, the soundtrack to "Monsoon Wedding," and Midori playing Mozart's sonatas.

**Q: Do you have any special writing rituals? For example, what do you have on your desk when you're writing?**

**LS:** I don't have any special rituals other than starting early so I don't get distracted by the day and drinking lots and lots of decaffeinated tea. On my desk I have photos of my sons, Chinese wind-up toys, a pencil holder my youngest son made for me, a photo of a dim sum lunch I made that was really gorgeous (if I do say so myself), a dictionary of Chinese street language, and the research notebooks I've used for each book so I can refer back to them.

**Q: What are you working on now?**

**LS:** When I first heard about nu shu, I thought, how could this exist and I didn't know about it? Then I thought, how could this exist and we all didn't know about it? So often we hear that in the past there were no women writers, no women artists, no women historians. There were women, but supposedly they didn't do anything. But of course they did things. It's just so often what they did was lost, forgotten, or deliberately covered up. In all of my books, I've tried to find and bring back lost stories. More and more, I find I'm increasingly drawn to the lost stories of women.

My new book is like a mirror image of *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, which was about 19th-century uneducated women who found solace and friendship through their secret writing. In the 17th-century, in the Hangzhou area of China, the women were extremely well educated, came from wealthy families, but still had bound feet. There were more women writers in this area who were being published than altogether in the rest of the world at that time. My new novel focuses on a sub-category of these women called the lovesick maidens.

This story is based on fact and focuses on three young women. The first was a sixteen-year-old girl, Chen Tong, who was engaged to be married. She loved an opera called "The Peony Pavilion," which is about a girl who catches a case of lovesickness, dies, comes back to earth as a ghost, and is eventually resurrected through true love. Chen Tong used to stay up late at night to read the opera, and then write her thoughts about the characters and the nature of love in the margins of the story. Unfortunately, like the main character in the opera, she became lovesick, wasted away, and died. The poet she was engaged to married another sixteen-year-old girl, who also loved "The Peony Pavilion."

She added her thoughts to the same volume as her predecessor. She lent the volume to a friend, who showed it around Hangzhou. Everyone kept asking, “Who could have written such wonderful thoughts about love?” To which the second wife responded, “My husband.” He became quite famous for this, but she caught a case of lovesickness, wasted away, and died. The poet married a third time to yet another sixteen-year-old girl. She added her thoughts in the margins, but she was made of different stuff than her two predecessors. She pawned her wedding jewelry, and used the money to have the volume published. “The Three Wives Commentary” became the first book of literary criticism written by women to be published in the world. I’m writing the novel as a ghost story within a ghost story. It’s about love, how women find their purpose in life, and those emotions which are so strong that they transcend time, place, and perhaps even death.

**Q: Is there a specific talent you would most like to have?**

**LS:** I’d love to have ESP, an awesome serve for tennis, to be able to TIVO in real life, and to know where the commas go at all times.

**Q: If you weren’t a writer what would you be?**

**LS:** A landscape architect.

**Q: How do you spend your time when you’re not writing?**

**LS:** I go for walks and play tennis. I love movies and see about 100 a year. But frankly, I don’t have much free time. I’m a L.A. City Commissioner. I also curate the occasional museum exhibition and do tons of speaking events each year. I’m also a freak when it comes to letter writing. I write lots of letters, and I think I’m pretty good at answering my e-mail in a timely way. (So write to me!) My days are extraordinarily full with all sorts of things and I have to say no more than I’d like so I can write.

**Q: In *Snow Flower*, you often refer to *cash*. What is that?**

**LS:** Cash was a type of money used in China. It was round and usually had a square cutout in the middle.

*Courtesy of [www.lisasee.com](http://www.lisasee.com)*

## On Writing *Snow Flower*

One day in the 1960s, an old woman fainted in a rural Chinese train station. When police searched her belongings in an effort to identify her, they came across papers with what looked to be a secret code written on them. This being the height of the Cultural Revolution, the woman was arrested and detained on suspicion of being a spy. The scholars who came to decipher the code realized almost at once that this was not something related to international intrigue. Rather, it was a written language used solely by women and it had been kept a “secret” from men for a thousand years. Those scholars were promptly sent to labor camp.

That secret language is called *nu shu* — women’s writing — and I first came across a brief mention of it when I wrote a review of Wang Ping’s *Aching for Beauty* for the *Los Angeles Times*. I became intrigued and then obsessed with *nu shu* and the culture that rose up around it. *Nu shu* doesn’t look anything like written Chinese, which is heavy and boxy. Rather, *nu shu* is long, slim, and frail. Many have said it looks like mosquito legs. I have thought that in many ways it has the delicacy of bird prints.

No one knows the true origin of *nu shu*, but it is believed that a young girl from Hunan Province, who was chosen to become the emperor’s concubine, invented it. She had thought that she would live a life of privilege. But she was hardly prepared for her loneliness or the palace intrigues that surrounded her. In order to write truthfully to her mother and sisters back home about her experience, she invented the code.

Over time a whole culture rose up around *nu shu* among women in what was then called Yong Ming County but now called Jiangyong County. At age seven, a girl had her feet bound. (The ideal size was just three inches long when completed.) From that time until she married out to another village at age seventeen, she lived in an upstairs room with only one window. When she went to her husband’s home, she spent the rest of her life in similar upstairs rooms, again with only one window from which to view the world. So, from the age of seven until their deaths, these women lived as virtual prisoners — hobbled by their bound feet and illiterate in men’s writing. Still, even in their solitude, they longed to express themselves and find consolation from other women in identical circumstances. They used *nu shu* to write letters, stories, and poems. It was “hidden” in embroidery, in weaving, and in paintings on fans. Women wrote about their joys, which were few, and their sorrows, which were many.

Two types of relationships developed that had *nu shu* at their core. The first was called a sworn sisterhood. In a particular village when all seven-year-old girls were having their feet bound, their mothers helped them form a sworn sisterhood. The girls would learn *nu shu* together, work on their diaries together, and prepare what were called “third-day wedding books” for each of their friends as they married out at age seventeen. Once all the girls had married out, the sworn sisterhood dissolved.

The other type of relationship was called a *laotong* — old same. When a woman had a daughter about to turn seven and begin her footbinding, she would meet with a matchmaker, not to find a suitable husband but to look for another girl in another village who could match eight characteristics with her daughter. The two girls had to match birth dates, be in the same birth order in both families, have the same size foot, and the like. Obviously, this was much harder to find than just linking up with other girls in the same village. If a prospect could be found, the two girls would be brought together to sign a contract matching them for life as a pair of old-sames. At seventeen, the girls would marry out to other villages, have children, and follow the normal course of their lives, but they would also continue to keep in contact with their *laotong* through their writing and occasional meetings for their rest of their lives. This type of “emotional marriage” — at a time and in a culture when emotions didn’t enter into marriages between men and women — is what I wanted to write about with the characters of Lily and Snow Flower.

\* \* \*

A good part of my interest in *nu shu* stems from how I was raised. I’m part Chinese and grew up spending a lot of time with my grandparents, aunts, and uncles in Los Angeles Chinatown. I’ve often said that I may not look Chinese (although when people see me with my family they say that the resemblance is quite striking) but that I’m Chinese in my heart. Perhaps because I come from a pioneer family — my great-great-grandfather came to work on the Transcontinental railroad and my great-grandfather was the patriarch of Los Angeles Chinatown — we have tenaciously held on to our customs and beliefs even though we’ve become better educated, lost our fluency in the language, and — in my case — lost most of the physical characteristics.

I’m only a couple of generations removed from my peasant roots. My great-great-grandmother carried people on her back from village to village to earn money to support her children. Sorrow — from losing a child or experiencing some other tragedy — was a luxury she and her immigrant descendants couldn’t afford. Later, when I began writing *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, I was able to show that kind of stoicism and acceptance in the characters of Snow Flower, Lily, and the other women who populate the novel, but I also called upon other beliefs that have been handed down in my family. I — like all my female cousins — grew up hearing “When a girl, obey your father; when a wife, obey your husband; when a widow, obey your son.” Of course, we rebelled, but we also absorbed more of that aphorism than perhaps we’d like to admit.

As I did my research, I discovered that few *nu shu* documents — whether letters, stories, weavings or embroideries — have survived, since most were burned at gravesites for metaphysical and practical reasons. In the 1930s, Japanese soldiers destroyed many pieces that had been kept as family heirlooms. During the Cultural Revolution, the zealous Red Guard burned even more texts, then banned the local women from attending religious festivals or attending gatherings where *nu shu* might be written, read, sung, or exchanged as gifts. In the following years, the Public Security Bureau’s scrutiny further diminished interest in learning or preserving the language. During the last half of the

twentieth century, *nu shu* nearly became extinct as the primary reasons that women used it disappeared. (For more information on *nu shu*, please read Cathy Silber's forthcoming non-fiction book, *Writing from the Useless Branch: Text and Practice in Nushu Culture*.)

After I chatted about *nu shu* in an e-mail with Michelle Yang, a fan of my work, she very sweetly took it upon herself to look up and then forward to me what she found on the Internet about the subject. That was enough for me to begin to plan a trip to Jiangyong County where I went in the fall of 2002. When I arrived, I was told I was only the second foreigner to go there, although I knew of a couple others who had apparently flown under the radar.

I can honestly say that this area is still as remote as ever. The moment I crossed into Hunan Province with Mr. Li (my driver) and Chen Yi Zhong (my interpreter), the four-lane highway gave way to a badly rutted dirt road. The villages we went to were located down muddy roadways or accessible only by crossing a river on a sampan. People who live in this area aren't just removed from the outside world or from the neighboring province but also from each other. A hundred years ago, the land was fertile and the people were relatively prosperous. Back then, even the poorest peasants were better off than they are today.

Mr. Li was not only a great driver (which is hard to find in China), but he also proved to be very patient when his car got stuck in one muddy track after another as we traveled from village to village. I was also extremely lucky to have Mr. Chen as my interpreter. His friendly manner, eagerness to walk unannounced into houses, subtlety with the local dialect, familiarity with classical Chinese and history, and enthusiastic interest in *nu shu* — something that he had not known existed — helped make my journey especially fruitful. He translated conversations in alleys and kitchens, as well as *nu shu* stories that had been collected by the *nu shu* museum. Since the Jiangyong area is still closed to foreigners, it was also necessary to travel in the company of a county official, also named Chen.

Together, Messieurs Li, Chen, and Chen took me by car, pony-pulled cart, sampan, and foot to see and do everything I wanted. To truly understand the *nu shu* women I needed to see what remained of their culture, walk the alleyways of their villages, and try to meet the last surviving original practitioner of the language. I didn't want to approach my trip as a journalist. Instead, I wanted to see, taste, touch, smell, and hear everything Jiangyong County had to offer, and then filter it through my own experience as a woman deeply influenced by my Chinese family.

We went to Tong Shan Li Village to meet Yang Huanyi, who was then aged ninety-six and the oldest living *nu shu* writer. (She passed away in September 2004.) Her feet had been bound when she was a girl and she told me about that experience, as well as her wedding ceremonies and festivities. She had learned the secret language as the only way to communicate with her friends. (Young women today no longer need to learn *nu shu*. Their feet aren't bound, they're literate, and they work outside the home where they can

meet their friends. Nowadays, young women learn the language as one might learn a national dance or a folksong. They're preserving and honoring the past, but it has no direct meaning to or purpose in their lives.) Yang Huanyi lived in three rooms with her son and daughter-in-law. A single light bulb hung from the ceiling and a television, which carried only state-run channels, dominated the tiny room. We sat on hard country-style benches much like the ones my grandparents used in our family store. We were offered oranges, which the men ate, spitting their seeds and dropping their peels on the concrete floor.

On the surface Yang Huanyi and I couldn't have been more different, but I felt instantly close to her. She reminded me very much of my grandmother. Yang Huanyi's hair was wrapped in a headdress. Her back was hunched. Her hands and fingers were crooked and knobby. Her eyes were watery. Her skin was rice paper thin and when she scratched her cheek, her skin tore and bled. She wore a child's pair of kung fu slippers with tissue stuffed into the toes to fill the empty space. Like Lily at the end of *Snow Flower*, she was too old and too tired to shoo away the flies that came to rest on her. But she was completely alert. She spent most of the afternoon talking about her childhood, her marriage, and her seven sworn sisters. Many of the lines that are found in the novel come directly from Yang Huanyi's life. "Marrying a daughter is like throwing out a cup of water," people had told her when she got into her flower-sitting chair.

Some of the most special moments that day were when she sang her *nu shu* wedding songs. "Why do I not cry when I get married?" she chanted in a quavering voice. "Because my life is not so happy. I want to get married, have children, and have a happy life." She remembered as well a woman who sang to her: "I'm already thirty-two. I live a miserable life. I wish I could get married and have a happy life." As hard as their lives were, Yang Huanyi explained, it was better to get married than not, for marriage was the only way to true happiness and fulfillment — giving birth to a son.

So much was still clear in Yang Huanyi's memory, including the drudgery of making wedding quilts. Her daughter-in-law brought out her own wedding quilts for me to look at. The two of them showed me how to make the stitches. And although in the novel I used very little of what they told me about the process of making bound-foot shoes, I'm fairly confident that I could make a pair if I had to.

In addition to spending time with Yang Huanyi, I also visited Puwei, where the Chinese government is making an effort to keep the language alive by opening a *nu shu* school. It was there that I met and interviewed Hu Mei Yue, the new teacher, and her family. She shared with me tales about her grandmothers and how they taught her *nu shu*. In the novel, Puwei became Lily's home village.

Then it was off to Tongkou, which in the novel is Snow Flower's home village and the place where Lily eventually lives. Even today, the village of Tongkou is an extraordinary place. The architecture, paintings on the houses, and what remains of the ancestral temple all attest to the high-quality of life that was once enjoyed by the people who lived there.

Interestingly, although today the village is poor and remote by any measure, the temple lists four men from this area who became imperial scholars of the highest rank during the reign of Emperor Daoguang.

The entire trip was extraordinary, if difficult. Every meal was an adventure. In the Yao nationality town of Gongcheng, we had a lunch that became Lily and Snow Flower's favorite meal during their annual visit to the Temple of Gupo. My interpreter picked out a live chicken and a few minutes later it was dropped into broth that boiled in a brass basin on our table. (The only difference between what my two fictional *laotong* and I experienced was that their broth was heated with coal and mine by propane tank.) We also tried the sugared taro dessert, which was truly one of the better things I've eaten in my life — certainly better than the sautéed pig penis I had on that same day. Every meal that appears in the novel is something either I ate on the trip or that my family makes. On another day, in what is believed to be the birthplace of the Yao culture, we came across the home of the local butcher. Outside the front door was a raised platform with an embedded wok for boiling the skin off carcasses. It turned out that my interpreter's parents had raised pigs to earn money to send him to school, so we sat on the platform and had a long talk about all that. Until that afternoon I hadn't known Snow Flower would be married to a butcher.

\* \* \*

I was still in China when I wrote the opening pages for *Snow Flower*. In many ways Lily's voice and her view of life were easy. She reminded me of my grandmother, great-aunt, and other female relatives — Chinese or not — at the end of their lives. To a person, they had felt tremendous regret that they hadn't been better wives, mothers, or friends, but they each also had at least one episode in their lives that gnawed at them and they hoped fruitlessly to somehow make amends. Sitting in my hotel room, I felt as though those women — especially my grandmother — were looking over my shoulder, encouraging me to tell the truth of their lives. I thought that through the character of Lily maybe I could make amends for all of them.

I would say that the entire novel flowed from that emotional place. My only real struggle was how I was going to deal with the subject of footbinding. Although anti-footbinding activities began in the late-nineteenth century, the practice lingered in rural areas well into the twentieth century. Only in 1951, when Mao Zedong's armies liberated Jiangyong County, did the practice finally end in the *nu shu* region. Many preconceptions and misconceptions still surround the practice of footbinding. It's easy to equate it with the horrific practice of female genital mutilation in Africa, the tradition of shrouding women in burkas in the Middle East, or even the strange, peculiar, often extreme cosmetic surgery treatments that so many American women seek. But I didn't want to put my contemporary Western values on the practice. Rather, I wanted to write about footbinding from the perspective of the women and girls who had grown up with it. For me, this brought up a lot of questions: How does a culture decide what's beautiful? How does our worth as women change according to that sense of beauty? How can a mother put her

daughter through such agony? And what would it mean to have achieved the socially accepted and acknowledged beauty of three-inch feet yet be hobbled or possibly crippled in the process?

Between my own family background, research, and imagination, the writing came easily. Then, when I was about halfway through the novel, I had an accident and got a very bad concussion. For the first month or so I stayed in bed. Like the *nu shu* women, I couldn't read or write. Unlike them, I had two windows to look out of. For another two months I wasn't allowed to drive. In a strange way, I felt as though my feet had been bound, since I was confined to my home and cut off from the rest of the world. Like many people who've had a sudden medical problem, I was surprised at what happened around me. Friends I thought would be supportive weren't, while others brought food and treats, drove me to doctors' appointments, and in every way acted as sworn sisters. My confinement and isolation, and the kindness and generosity of the women who cared for me, gave me a visceral experience of the *nu shu* women and their world.

But I hope you don't have to have a concussion to connect to Lily and Snow Flower! *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* is a story about friendship and what it means to be a woman. Yes, our lives are completely different from those lived by the *nu shu* writers, but inside we are the same. We want people to hear our thoughts, appreciate our creativity, and feel empathy for our emotions. As daughters, we have all experienced complicated — and sometimes thorny — relationships with our mothers. As mothers, we have all felt deep terror when one of our children gets sick. As women, we have all at one time or another wondered about the true and ever-lasting mystery of the men in our lives. These are universals, as is the fear women feel during times of political upheavals that occur in what could still be called the outside world of men — whether during the Taiping Rebellion so many years ago or today for women in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Sudan, or even right here in this country in the post-9/11 era. On the surface, we as American women are independent, free, and mobile, but at our cores we still long for love, friendship, happiness, tranquility, and to be heard.

I hope you enjoy the book!

*Courtesy of [www.lisasee.com](http://www.lisasee.com)*

## Discussion Questions

1. In your opinion, is Lily, who is the narrator, the heroine or the villain? What are her flaws and her strengths?
2. Do you think the concept of “old sames” exists today? Do you have an “old same,” or are you part of a sworn sisterhood? In what ways are those relationships similar or different from the ones in nineteenth-century China?
3. Some men in nineteenth-century China apparently knew about *nu shu*, the secret women’s writing described in *Snow Flower*. Why do you think they tolerated such private communication?
4. Lily writes her story so that Snow Flower can read it in the afterworld. Do you think she tells her story in a convincing way so that Snow Flower can forgive and understand? Do you think Snow Flower would have told the story differently?
5. When Lily and Snow Flower are girls, they have one intimate — almost erotic — moment together. Do you think their relationship was sexual or, given the times, were they simply girls who saw this only as an innocent extension of their friendship?
6. Having a wife with bound feet was a status symbol for men, and, consequently, having bound feet increased a woman’s chances of marriage into a wealthier household. Women took great pride in their feet, which were considered not only beautiful but also their best and most important feature. As a child, would you have fought against having your feet bound, as Third Sister did, knowing you would be consigned to the life of a servant or a “little daughter-in-law”? As a mother, would you have chosen to bind your daughter’s feet?
7. The Chinese character for “mother love” consists of two parts: one meaning “pain,” the other meaning “love.” In your own experience, from the perspective of a mother or a daughter, is there an element of truth to this description of mother love?
8. The author sees *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* as a novel about love and regret, but do you think there’s also an element of atonement in it as well?
9. In the story, we are told again and again that women are weak and worthless. But were they really? In what ways did Lily and Snow Flower show their strength and value?

10. Although the story takes place in the nineteenth century and seems very far removed from our lives — we don't have our feet bound, we're free and mobile — do you think we're still bound up in other ways; for instance, by career, family obligations, conventions of feminine beauty, or events beyond our control such as war, the economy, and natural disasters?
11. Because of its phonetic nature, *nu shu* could easily be taken out of context and be misunderstood. Today, many of us communicate through e-mail or instant-messaging. Have you ever had an experience where one of your messages has been misunderstood because of lack of context, facial or body gestures, and tone of voice? Or have you ever been on the receiving end of a message that you misinterpreted and your feelings were hurt?
12. Madame Wang, the matchmaker, is a foot-bound woman and yet she does business with men. How is she different from the other women in the story? Do you think she is considered a woman of status or is she merely a necessary evil?

*Courtesy of Random House*