

Shanghai Girls: A Novel

By Lisa See

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In 1937 Shanghai—the Paris of Asia—twenty-one-year-old Pearl Chin and her younger sister, May, are having the time of their lives. Both are beautiful, modern, and carefree—until the day their father tells them that he has gambled away their wealth. To repay his debts, he must sell the girls as wives to suitors who have traveled from Los Angeles to find Chinese brides. As Japanese bombs fall on their beloved city, Pearl and May set out on the journey of a lifetime, from the Chinese countryside to the shores of America. Though inseparable best friends, the sisters also harbor petty jealousies and rivalries. Along the way they make terrible sacrifices, face 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.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review
Book Description
For readers of the phenomenal bestsellers *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* and *Peony in Love*--a stunning new novel from Lisa See about two sisters who leave Shanghai to find new lives in 1930s Los Angeles.

May and Pearl, two sisters living in Shanghai in the mid-1930s, are beautiful, sophisticated, and well-educated, but their family is on the verge of bankruptcy. Hoping to improve their social standing, May and Pearl's parents arrange for their daughters to marry "Gold Mountain men" who have come from Los Angeles to find brides.

But when the sisters leave China and arrive at Angel's Island (the Ellis Island of the West)--where they are detained, interrogated, and humiliated for months--they feel the harsh reality of leaving home. And when May discovers she's pregnant the situation becomes even more desperate. The sisters make a pact that no one can ever know.

A novel about two sisters, two cultures, and the struggle to find a new life in America while bound to the old, *Shanghai Girls* is a fresh, fascinating adventure from beloved and bestselling author Lisa See.

Amazon Exclusive: Lisa See on *Shanghai Girls*



I'm writing this on a plane to Shanghai. For the last couple of weeks I've been thinking about all the things I want to see and do on this research trip: look deeper into the Art Deco movement in Shanghai, visit a 17th-century house in a village of 300 people to observe the Sweeping the Graves Festival, and check out some old theaters in Beijing. But as I sit on the plane, I'm not thinking of the adventures that are ahead but of the people and places I've left behind. I've been gone from home only a few hours and already I'm homesick!

This puts me in mind of Pearl and May, the characters in *Shanghai Girls*. This feeling--longing for home and missing the people left behind--is at the heart of the novel. We live in a nation of immigrants. We all have someone in our families who was brave enough, scared enough, or crazy enough to leave the home country to come to America. I'm a real mutt in terms of ancestry, but I know that the Chinese side of my family left China because they were fleeing war, famine, and poverty. They were lured to America in hopes of a better life, but leaving China also meant saying goodbye to the homes they'd been born in, to their parents, brothers, and sisters, and to everything and everyone they knew. This experience is the blood and tears of American experience.

Pearl and May are lucky, because they come to America together. They're sisters and they have each other. I've always wanted to write about sisters and I finally got my chance with *Shanghai Girls*. You could say that either I'm an only child or that I'm one of four sisters, because I have a former step-sister I've known for

over 50 years and two half-sisters from different halves who I've known since they were born. Is *Shanghai Girls* autobiographical? Not really, but my sister Katharine and I once had a fight that was like the flour fight that May and Pearl got into when they were girls. And there was an ice cream incident that I used in the novel that sent my sister Clara right down memory lane when she read the manuscript. I'm also the eldest, and we all know what that means. I'm the one who's supposed to be the bossy know-it-all. (But if that's true, then why are they the ones who are always right?) What I know is that we're very different from each other and our life experiences couldn't be more varied, and yet we have a deep emotional connection that goes way beyond friendship. My sisters knew me when I was a shy little kid, helped me survive my first broken heart, share the memories of bad family car trips, and were at my side for the happiest moments in my life. More recently, we've begun to share things like the loss of our childhood homes, the changing of the neighborhoods we grew up in, and the frailties and illnesses of our myriad parents.

My emotions and experiences are deeply entwined with the stories I write. So as I fly over the Pacific, of course I'm thinking about May and Pearl, the people and places they left behind, the hopes and dreams that kept them moving forward, and the strength and solace they found in each other, but I'm thinking about myself too. As soon as I get to the hotel, I'm going to call my husband and sons to tell them I arrived safely, and then I'm going to send some e-mails to my sisters.--*Lisa See*

(Photo © Patricia Williams)

From Publishers Weekly
See (*Peony in Love*) explores tradition, the ravages of war and the importance of family in her excellent latest. Pearl and her younger sister, May, enjoy an upper-crust life in 1930s Shanghai, until their father reveals that his gambling habit has decimated the family's finances and to make good on his debts, he has sold both girls to a wealthy Chinese-American as wives for his sons. Pearl and May have no intention of leaving home, but after Japanese bombs and soldiers ravage their city and both their parents disappear, the sisters head for California, where their husbands-to-be live and where it soon becomes apparent that one of them is hiding a secret that will alter each of their fates. As they adjust to marriage with strangers and the challenges of living in a foreign land, Pearl and May learn that long-established customs can provide comfort in unbearable times. See's skillful plotting and richly drawn characters immediately draw in the reader, covering 20 years of love, loss, heartbreak and joy while delivering a sobering history lesson. While the ending is ambiguous, this is an accomplished and absorbing novel. *(June)*
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From School Library Journal
Adult/High School—This extensively researched historical novel is engrossing and readable. Spanning three decades and two continents (from 1930s China to Los Angeles in the 1950s), the book explores universal themes: adolescence, family relationships, secrets, immigration, and discrimination. Readers meet Pearl and May as teenage sisters in prewar Shanghai. They revel in modern ways and defy the wishes of their parents by modeling for "Beautiful Girls" calendars and staying out until the wee hours. Pearl's narration has a confiding tone in the early chapters—she discusses clothes, make-up, parental restrictions, and love interests. As the story develops, See balances Pearl's personal revelations with evocative descriptions of people, places, meals, and Chinese customs, as well as several suspenseful episodes of action and drama. The well-drawn characters face realistic hardships, some personal (lost love, business failures) and others global (Japanese atrocities in China, World War II, communism). Vivid descriptions of life at Angel Island Immigration Station, the development of L.A.'s Chinatown, filmmaking in 1940s Hollywood, and the 1950s Confession Program convey the stress, excitement, and longing for home that many Chinese immigrants experienced in the United States. This book will appeal to readers of historical fiction, and may be of special interest to those with ties to the Chinese community.—*Sondra VanderPloeg, Colby-Sawyer College, New*

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Selma McDaniel:

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