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This New York Times Notable Book tells the true story of what it was like growing up in Mao's China, where the soul was secondary to the state, beauty was mistrusted, and love could be punishable by death. Newsweek calls Anchee Min's prose "as delicate and evocative as a traditional Chinese brush painting."

Red Azalea Details

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From Reader Review Red Azalea for online ebook

Aubrey says

4.5/5

There are books that make me especially grateful that I don't write reviews for anyone but myself, in that I am perfectly free to write what I want, how I want, with more attention paid to what I thought and the terms of civil discourse than the 'proper' way of reviewing. This is one of them.

What we have here is a memoir written by a woman who grew to adulthood on the tail end of Mao's reign, the book itself ending a few pages after the death of the Chairman who spearheaded the Cultural Revolution. Anchee, a name that she translates as 'Jade of Peace', grew up in a family fully conformed to the ideals of the Communism. Her youth is filled with absorbing the ideals of the Communist Party in forms both written and sung, the texts of Chairman Mao and the operas of Madame Mao, Comrade Jiang Ching. The older she grows, the more conflicted she becomes about the life that has been planned for her, a struggle that begins when she is made to denounce her beloved teacher as a 'capitalist spy' and continues with her burgeoning sexuality that favors women over men.

This is not a book that I feel comfortable delineating in the usual sense, going through the construction of themes and commenting on what the author achieves with their writing. For one, this is a piece of Chinese literature that fully expresses its culture in every word of prose, something that I have no real experience with. Two, this is a memoir that is much more concerned with detailing the facts and feelings of a life than teasing out an overarching meaning to it all. So I will discuss what struck me and stayed in my thoughts, and leave it at that.

Communism is not nearly as dangerous a word in the US as it was more than sixty years ago, but it is still heavily contextualized in fearful and hateful terms. The memoir fully demonstrates the negative aspects of living in a country that embraces Communistic ideologies, and I won't argue that it wasn't a horribly oppressive time to be alive. However, if you asked me to differentiate between the palls of overwhelming fear of conspiracy and betrayal that existed in both the Cultural Revolution and the McCarthy era, I would say that this was not a matter of Communism and Democracy. These two periods of time in two separate countries were both concerned with a government fearing the spread of contrary ideologies in the masses, and due to cultural differences took different measures to control what they thought was a problem. One side believed that it was necessary to have people experience all classes of existence, whether or not their skills were more suited to other, more intellectual forms of labor. The other didn't see the need for breaking down class barriers, and instead focused more heavily on the witch-hunt aspect of rooting out 'spies' and 'infiltrations of the enemy'. One side suffered greatly over their convictions in terms of starvation and constant leadership upheavals. The other forgot.

Essentially, if you asked me if this book made me think that Communism is evil, I would say no, it didn't. If you think that I'm evil for saying that, so be it. My concerns lie outside the realm of political machinations.

One of these concerns is the plight of women the world over, a theme that for all its cultural differences was strongly expressed in the later pages of this book. The aforementioned Madame Mao was a powerful figure in the Cultural Revolution who helped keep a tight rein over the masses through the use of entertainment in the form of operas. Despite her immense contributions to the Party using power given to her by Mao during his time of need, the death of the Chairman led to her downfall; she was quickly swept away on the tide of

countrymen calling her whore, calling her bitch, calling her a power-hungry murdereress.

I knew Mao's name before this book. I did not know Jiang Ching's, not even as 'Madame Mao'. This is not the first time that a woman in a position of predominantly masculine power, whether political or militant, has been swept under the rug of history in the midst of obfuscation and scoffs. It will certainly not be the last.

Finally, I must give special mention to Min's prose, short and sweetly staccato and ripe with metaphors that my mind, subsumed as it is in European and American literature, rarely encounters. It especially shines while she is in the full throes of her sexuality, the mindfulness of the nonconforming aspects of its passion drowned in the delight of its realization, both during the beginning of one love:

The moment I touched her breasts, I felt a sweet shock. My heart beat disorderly. A wild horse broke off its reins. She whispered something I could not hear. She was melting snow. I did not know what role I was playing anymore: her imagined man or myself. I was drawn to her. The horse kept running wild. I went where the sun rose. Her lips were the color of a tomato. There was a gale mixed with thunder inside of me. I was spellbound by desire. I wanted to be touched. Her hands skimmed my breasts. My mind maddened. My senses cheered frantically in a raging fire. I begged her to hold me tight. I heard a little voice rising in the back of my head demanding me to stop. As I hesitated, she caught my lips and kissed me fervently. The little voice disappeared. I lost myself in caresses.

And the end:

We did not want to realize that we had been holding on to something, a dead past that could no longer prosper. We were rice shoots that had been pulled out of the mud. We lay, roots exposed. But we did not want to submit. We would never submit. We were heroines. We just tried to bridge the gap. We were trying our best. The rice shoots were trying to grow without mud. Trying to survive the impossible. We had been resisting the brutality of the beating weather. The hopelessness had sunk into the cores of our flesh. I would not let her see me cry. But she saw my tears in the kisses.

I read for many reasons, mainly for self-improvement but also for the desire to hear the words of someone a world away in a life that I will never experience, to understand and relate to the innate humanity of those who by chance of birth differ from me in terms of race, culture, sexuality, and a whole host of myriad aspects both physical and ideological. This book achieved exactly that, and I only wish that there were more like it.

Velvetink says

Anchee Min remembers with clarity and poignancy growing up during China's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). She experienced abject poverty, brutal physical hardship, first love, and loss, all during this extraordinary and terrifying period of China's history.

A Pretty powerful and amazing book.

Chrissie says

Sure, this book is about the Cultural Revolution, but it is even more about both lesbian and heterosexual love relationships. If a book about two women's love for each other will bother you, then I will advise you to look elsewhere. Furthermore, it is a disturbing book, in that it focuses on relationships where people use others for their own gain. This is an autobiography, and this book does relate what happened to the author during the Cultural Revolution. I do admire the author for so honestly revealing her emotions. This took nerve, and I give her credit for that. It doesn't make me like the book though. I was wondering to what extent her attraction to another woman arose because this was the only human contact available to her. She was starved for contact, kindness, warmth. This is not discussed; the book lacks introspection.

There is no humor in this book. None.

My biggest complaint is the author's language. It is simplistic, particularly in the beginning. This cannot be explained by the fact that English is not the author's mother tongue. At the end of the book the words used are more nuanced, and yet the sentence structure remains choppy.

Events are crudely depicted:

She was a worker in a steel factory and was the daughter of three generations of workers. Her head was the shape of an egg. Features spread out from the nose. She had a small thin mouth. So small that it looked like the anus of my hen.... (page 165)

Not only is this disgusting, but neither am I left with a clear idea of how this woman looks! The individuals express themselves crudely in dialogs too.

Speaking of dialogs..... In most books that which is said is placed within quotation marks. Not in this book. Although the first word in a sentence does begin with a capital letter, and there is a period at the end, quotation marks are non-existent. Punctuation helps a reader understand what is being said. What? Are they trying to save money on ink? Yeah, I need a little humor after reading this book!

The book did keep me reading to the end, and there are some interesting bits about Jiang Qing, Mao Zedong's last wife, so two stars.

Margitte says

This is the memoir of a young girl facing the Cultural Revolution in China. She experiences first the hope and jubilation, then the disillusionment and sorrow of its ultimate impact.

Anchee (Jade of Peace) is raised on the teachings of Mao, becomes a leader of the Little Red Guards in elementary school, during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in China.

As a bright young woman, a child of two educated parents, and oldest of four children, she is sent off to work as a laborer on a farm, called Red Fire Farm, near the East China Sea, where thousands of young people from the cities were sent to produce food in nothing more than slave camps, under the auspices of the Communist ideal.

It was 1974. Her parents, known to the neighbors as chopsticks (always living in harmony), lost their station in life as well when they too, were demoted to laborer status as part of the ideal of social equalization of all people.

The new dispensation in China demanded of all citizens to liberate themselves of any individualism and personal dreams. Everything had to be sacrificed to the greater scheme of the collective aspiration of making China the greatest communist nation in the world. China would ultimately rule the planet and all its citizens had to collectively work towards this goal. The revolution's needs must become their needs.

Fear is the driving force of all people. Party policy determines every aspect of life. Love does not have a place in the new China. It is forbidden. Dissidents were 'removed' as traitors. Spies were everywhere. Betrayal was an effective weapon.

Her life on the farm becomes more bearable when she forms a bond with Yan(Discipline) Shen(Victory) - the party secretary and commander of the company managing the farm.

She had a pair of fiery, intense eyes, in which I saw the energy of a lion. She had weather-beaten skin, thick eyebrows, a bony nose, high cheekbones, a full mouth, in the shape of a water chestnut. She had the shoulders of an ancient warlord, extravagantly broad. She was barefoot. Her sleeves and trousers were rolled halfway up. Her hands rested on her waist. When her eyes focused on mine, I trembled for no reason. She burned me with the sun in her eyes. I felt bare. . .

Then she shouted, Don't any of you shit on my face! Don't any of you disappoint the glorious title of "The Advanced Seventh Company," the model of the entire Red Fire Farm Army! She asked whether she had made her point clear. And we, startled, said, Yes!

The two girls become each other's guardians and intimate soulmates. The back-breaking work mostly in water, where leeches feasted on their bodies, become the backdrop to their secret meetings of mind, body and spirit. It becomes their survival force.

An opportunity arises for Anchee to become an actress. She has to become the Red Azalea. A mysterious Supervisor appears in her life who takes charge of the movie that was suppose to become the new history of China. But her lack of motivation cripples her chances to win the starring role. He becomes her mentor anyway and eventually her second love. In secret. The relationship is held under the same highly secret wraps as the film itself.

Anchee struggles with her emotions, heartbreak, bitterness, jealousy, disillusionment, loneliness and fears. *"Swallow the bitterest in bitter; it makes one the finest in fine."*, the Supervisor reminded her.

She had to get her part in the new history of China right. He was determined and desperate for her to succeed.

You see, we are going to go through a forest of guns and a rain of bullets to pay respect to our mothers. Mothers who, for thousands of years, lived their lives in shame, died with shame, were buried and rotted in shame. We are going to tell them, Now it is a new world. A world where being born female merits celebration and salute." . . .

"He asked me to remember the darkness of the night, to watch the marching steps of history, to watch how it was altered, to see how the dead were made up and made to speak." . . .

"He was a man and a woman. His story was bad liquor. It poured into my throat and made me drunk with heat. This is what I want to see in your eyes, he said. A million bulls rushing down a hill with their tails on fire." ...

"He had never trusted the Chinese history books. Because those books were written by people who were impotent of desire. People who were paid by the generations of emperors. They were eunuchs. Their desires had been castrated."...

The sinister motive behind the opera made into a movie, one of Madam Mao, Comrade Jiang Ching's famous works, is revealed in

the end, when Comrade Mao suddenly dies on September 9th, 1976, and Comrade Jiang Ching (his second wife) suddenly no longer existed for the nation. She was called the whore, the worn slipper and eventually jailed as traitor. She was accused of murdering the great leader by poisoning him. *Death by hanging*, was the outcry throughout the nation.

"I saw the glittering in his bright almond eyes. Pearls dripped slowly down his cheeks like a broken necklace."

I cannot do justice the the picturesque, poetic prose of this memoir. The author relives her past, describing the utterly devastating conditions of urban dwellers, the inhumane policies of the regime, in which millions of people died from starvation alone, as well as the dire circumstances of the farm dwellers, in such vivid detail, that it becomes an unsettling and upsetting experience for the reader through most of the text. However, there are beautiful moments in which the beauty of the country and its people is recalled.

It is not a book for the faint-hearted, but well worth the read for those who appreciate the history of our world from a different perspective.

It is not an easy read. But it is a story well documented. One that should be told and read.

Vasha7 says

At one point in this memoir, Anchee Min quotes the proverb "Poverty gives birth to evil personalities". This book shows that happening, but it is not just material poverty -- the women who have so little power battle each other like a pack of starving dogs fighting over a very small crust. Min's main theme, too, is the drought of desire in a sexually and emotionally repressive culture. Friendship is subversive and cannot survive, sex is subversive. Min weaves together her themes in a subtle and skillful structure, selecting details and observations from among her memories. Almost all the major characters presented are women. The language is rather graceless, it never lets you forget that the author is translating her memories from Chinese; yet it's very effective, and never falls into English clichés.

Gianna says

I didn't want to rate the book. How does one rate someone's life story anyway? The memories or events one selects as meaningful? Anchee Min is a natural story teller, and her memoir reads more like a novel. I marveled at the numerous details, the carefully captured descriptions of one's movements, the precision of reported speech, and wondered how accurate all of these details actually are.

The emotions are raw. If it is difficult to read at times, it is not because of the writing in any way, but because some of the scenes are saturated with cruelty or human desperation. The memoir hooks the reader with its heartfelt revelations, but I admit that I like the prose of and *The Last Empress* better. The book is divided in three sections, and the first two are stronger than the last one. I am not convinced that the relationship between the author and Yan should be so central, and I wonder if it's designed this way just to spice things up. The relationship seems more of an episode, a phase and not really so all-encompassing as it is presented to be. The ending is anticlimactic and leaves me with more questions than answers. I am curious about what happened to the author's siblings or her parents and about how she managed to leave China.

Despite some of the book's weaknesses, it is illuminating to read this very personal account--and I suggest approaching it as a personal account rather than historical analysis--of a young woman's life during Mao's regime. Although young Anchee Min's fate is changed by a stroke of luck when she was selected as an actor rather than her own acting talent or determination, the immigrant writer Anchee Min has certainly demonstrated talent and a lot of determination to succeed.

CaseyTheCanadianLesbrarian says

This year I've been doing a reading project of only authors of colour, pretty much all LGBTQ. I've read a ton of great stuff, and one of the best things this challenge has made me do is discover some authors that I never would have encountered otherwise. One such writer is Anchee Min, whose memoir *Red Azalea* I read a few weeks ago. I was totally and utterly blown-away by the gorgeous, unique writing and the page-turning, I-can't-believe-this-is-true plot. I can't believe I might not have found this book if I hadn't made an effort to research books by queer people of colour. Shame on me for not reading this earlier.

Red Azalea follows Anchee (note: I decided to refer to her by her first name since it feels weird to call the character in the book by a last name!) growing up in the last days of Mao's China, during the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and 70s. It was a movement to "purge" remaining capitalist and traditionalist elements in what was now a communist country. As a child, Anchee was part of the Red Guards, a youth military group dedicated to enforcing Maoism and the Cultural Revolution. In her late teens, she was later forcibly sent from the city to work at a communal farm—as were millions of other urban youth to work brutal days from 5am to 9pm. After a few years, Anchee was miraculously plucked from obscurity to partake in the Chinese propaganda film industry in Shanghai, where she encountered a whole other host of problems. She eventually left China for the US in the 80s.

Okay, that's the story, but that's not really the story, you know. This is such an emotionally and lyrically rich memoir, evocative but never showy, and intensely erotic without ever being cheesy or cheap. In a scene in part one, Anchee is manipulated into publicly humiliating a beloved teacher for being an enemy spy in front

of her entire school. Ten years later, she finds the teacher, and goes to her, intending to apologize. She receives this chilling response:

I am very sorry, I don't remember you. I don't think I ever had you as my student.

It's in the second part of the book that Anchee is forced at age 17 to part with her parents, who "stood there like frosted aubergines—with heads hanging weakly in front of their chests" as the truck drives off, their daughter riding in the back. It's at the communal farm that Anchee meets Yan, a legend, a heroine renowned for her brute strength on the farm and dedication as Comrade Party Secretary. This is Anchee's first glimpse of the woman she later falls in love with:

She had a pair of fiery intense eyes, in which I saw the energy of a lion. She had weather-beaten skin, thick eyebrows, a bony nose, high cheekbones, a full mouth in the shape of a water chestnut. She had the shoulders of an ancient warlord, extravagantly broad. She was barefoot. Her sleeves and trousers were rolled halfway up. Her hands rested on her waist. When her eyes focused on mine, I trembled for no reason. She burned me with the sun in her eyes. I felt bare.

As the two women's relationship develops, Anchee begins to realize just how sexually repressive the regime is, in addition to the isolation, alienation, and general mass psychosis. I'm not talking just about queer sexuality: the system does not allow the young women at the farm any sexuality at all. A friend of Anchee's is mentally broken and eventually commits suicide after being interrogated and humiliated after being found with a male lover. What's fascinating and disturbing is that the party officials present this type of action as feminist, and declare they saved Anchee's friend from being raped.

When I say this book is beautifully, uniquely written I especially mean the way Anchee Min writes about her growing love for Yan. It's Yan who makes her feel write this: "I stood in the sunshine, feeling, feeling, the rising of a hope." A hope like this:

She asked me to feel her heart. I wished I was the blood in that chamber. In the hammering of her heartbeat, the rising and falling of her chest. I saw a city of chaos. A mythical force drew me to her. I felt the blazing of a fire inside me.

When Yan and Anchee finally kiss, it's beautiful, and sexy, and just everything you've been wanting in a love scene. Trust me. Okay, don't trust me: read this quotation:

She said, I want you to obey me. You always did well when you obeyed me. She licked my tears and said this was how she was going to remember us.

I moved my hands slowly through her shirt. She pulled my fingers to unbutton her bra. The buttons were tight, five of them. Finally, the last one came off. The moment I touched her breasts, I felt a sweet shock. My heart beat disorderedly. A wild horse broke off its reins. She whispered something I could not hear. She was melting snow....The horse kept running wild. I went where the sun rose. Her lips were the colour of a tomato. There was a gale mixed with thunder inside me. I was spellbound by desire. I wanted to be touched. Her hands skimmed my breasts. My mind maddened. My senses cheered frantically in a raging fire.

There's something about the phrases and metaphors that Anchee Min creates that are strikingly different from any other writing I've read in English. If my calculations are correct, she was about 30, maybe a bit younger when she moved to the US, with only a minimal knowledge of English; this means she was relatively old (in terms of language learning) when she started writing and speaking in English. The lovely, strange way she writes made me think about what kind of effect speaking more than one language has on

your writing. As an ESL teacher, it made me wonder if teaching English students to write and speak like native speakers might be detrimental to their creativity, that minimizing the different ways in which they speak English might actually be a bad thing. I can't imagine a native speaker of English coming up with some of the images Anchee Min does, and that's what makes it such a beautifully written memoir.

I feel like to discuss part three of the memoir would spoil some things that must not be spoiled—in my opinion, anyway—so I won't get into too much detail. Once I got about half way through this book, I couldn't put it down, while I wanted to savour the language at the same time. You're in for stunning, sensual writing right until the end, even or perhaps especially in Anchee's despair and heartbreak: "I could hear the sound of my dream's spine breaking."

You should move *Red Azalea* to the top of your to-read list. I promise, you won't regret it.

Melki says

The one lesson I took away from this book is that when my gut tells me to stop reading, I should listen to it. Only about 30 pages in, I wanted to walk away and I truly wish I had. Min has a fairly emotionless style, and I could not feel for her. I was much more interested in the supporting "characters" all of whom seemed to be leading more fascinating lives than the author. She endures some hardships, but it turns out her biggest crisis is when she is cheated out of the starring role in a Communist propaganda film. Boo-hoo! The Cincinnati Post book reviewer who likened this book to "The Diary of Anne Frank" should be fired.

Karo says

Red Azalea is not difficult to read -- it is a book easily consumed in one or two sittings. However, when it comes to the digestion of what's been read, that's a different story altogether. *Red Azalea* is the story of the author's childhood under China's Cultural Revolution, but tackled with seemingly simple language that manages to impart complicated undercurrents of meaning to the reader. Anchee Min has stated in interviews that she admires the painting style of Henri Matisse, and that her writing style is a reflection of that simplicity and naivete.

Red Azalea tells Anchee Min's story from elementary school where she is a good communist leader right off the bat, to her time spent at a farm where she has a relationship with her supervisor, to being chosen to star in a film version of one of Madame Mao's operas, *Red Azalea*. I found Anchee Min to be inaccessible, and the memoir difficult to ground in reality; however, this did not prevent me from enjoying the book and being vastly educated by it. The tone of the book was almost otherworldly, perhaps because of the lack of everyday details that would somehow anchor the events. I found myself often glancing back at the cover of the book, as if to remind myself that this was indeed nonfiction. *Red Azalea* is quite different from any book I've ever read: a memoir both complicated and simple, a plot both clear and elusive. Recommended for a challenge where you'd least expect one.

Lisa says

After reading "Becoming Madame Mao," a fictionalized biography of Madame Mao by Anchee Min, it was interesting to read her memoir about her years first at a collective farm during the Mao years and then in the Chinese movie industry. Now it's understandable how she had so much insight into Madame Mao. Living here in the United States, it's hard to imagine life in a country that sounds so much like "1984" realized. Reading a personal account of someone's life during this period helped to bring understanding of this period in China. It's amazing that she was able to arrive in America with so much of her personality still in tact.

Jim Fonseca says

A story of life during Mao's Cultural Revolution in China (1966-1976) when many were killed or shipped off to forced labor farms. Our heroine is sent as a young girl to do backbreaking work in the fields. Families live in terror, subject to the whims of village councils who show up one day and announce that your family is being evicted because you have too many rooms compared to the size of your family. You are out on the street. Refusal to cooperate with whatever the state has in mind for you will impact harshly on your parents and siblings, so you have to go along. You can never trust anyone, so you always agree and go along with the majority regardless of what you think is right or wrong.

But, like Cinderella, because of her clean peasant look and attitude, the main character ends up selected to play the role of the young Mao's wife in a propaganda movie. This book is also a coming of age story of a young woman who has bisexual experiences. But any happiness can only be bittersweet in this environment.

The story is quasi-autobiographical. The author's parents were teachers, a target of the Cultural Revolution. Min was forced to work on a collective farm and was selected to play the same role as the heroine of the novel (although the film was never produced). Today, age 57, she lives in San Francisco.

(Edited 12/22/2016)

Bryn Greenwood says

This is one of those books that I hardly know what to say about, as evidenced by the fact that it took me six months to finish it.

The thing that kept coming to mind as I worked my way through what is essentially a tale of fear, isolation, deprivation, and heartbreak, was ... HOLY SHIT, THE WHOLE COUNTRY OF CHINA GOT TAKEN IN BY A CULT! That level of mindboggled shock and horror.

I learned all these basic facts about Chinese history in school. Cultural Revolution, communism, yeah yeah yeah. What I did not learn in school was just how brutal it was for all these people to be torn out of their lives

and enslaved and starved for an ideology that was essentially a cult. This book really helped fill in that gap of my education.

Because it's a memoir, it often reads very abstractly and somewhat poetically. Min is not recreating dialogue and settings. She is painting a picture of this experience that won't leave me for a long time.

Carol Douglas says

This is one woman's story of what it was like to be a girl sent to the countryside in China's Cultural Revolution. Anchee Min shows how hard it is to pick cotton all day, which of course reminded me of slavery in the United States. She also demonstrates how all-pervasive ideology was: Even endearments between sweethearts may be phrased in political slogans.

The most unusual aspect of the book is the moving love relationship between two girls working in the same production team. Of course such relationships were forbidden, and indeed all sexual relationships were. The story moves to Shanghai film studios, which were cutthroat.

Towards the end, I liked the story less and found it less believable. But the fault may be in me. This is an autobiography, and I suppose I shouldn't doubt any of it.

I am glad that Anchee Min was finally able to leave China, or her voice would have been silenced. She has gone on to write books about Jiang Qing, Mao's wife, and Mao himself. But of course they are present in this book, too, though not directly. They controlled China, and this book demonstrates that.

Stasa Fritz says

This is part of my MFA reading responses. I really was a bit underwhelmed by this book.

Response to Red Azalea, by Anchee Min.

There are two aspects I would note in the way Min writes. The first, the simplistic—on the surface—language and sentences. The sentences are extremely short, almost staccato. This is especially true in the beginning, which mirrors the early age of the narrator at that time, but I believe it is not due to this, but rather that English is not Min's first language. Nonetheless, the simple language does not mean that there are not complex thoughts or changes going on in the narrator. Nor, does it mean that we do not get some strong visuals that simultaneously tap into the Chinese culture, such as the description of her first encounter with the head of the “farm.”

She had a pair of fiery intense eyes, in which I saw the energy of a lion. She had weather-beaten skin, thick eyebrows, a boney nose, high cheekbones, a full mouth, in the shape of a water chestnut. She had the shoulders of an ancient warlord, extravagantly broad. She was barefoot. Her sleeves and trouser were rolled halfway up. Her hands rested on her waist. (52)

The simple language and short sentences does wear on the reader. It is not clear whether this is intentional or not. The subject matter itself is wearing, with one insult of Maoist communism after another hitting the reader. This combined with the short sentences wants to make the reader scream with frustration and rail against the situation.

The simple sentences often convey the childlike quality of the narrator, despite the fact that in many ways—as she states early on—she was never a child. I would have found it more effective if the sentences

became more sophisticated later in the book, but they really do not.

The second noticeable writing technique, one that I hate, is the lack of dialogue punctuation. In Min's writing it is not quite the same as, for instance, Cormac McCarthy's. Her sentences are more of a past tense summary narrative, while his is more of a "my writing should make it obvious that this is a dialogue," combined with his own admission that he likes to imitate a biblical style of writing. But, I digress.

Overall Min gets away with what could be difficult writing to read by the subject matter. Memoirs written about painful life experiences, from cancer, personal tragedy, to big events in first person—the holocaust, Vietnam, Soviet Russia, Maoist China, Rwandan genocide—we forgive strange writing by the power of the experience that is expressed. We forgive it only when it feels real. Personal. Ultimately, Min is effective this way. Her writing is personal. We admire that is not a translation and her words directly and they feel like her words. We don't mind the slightly strange metaphors and similes, because they also seem like authentic cultural differences. For instance the wording and the simile, "Lu sensed my intimacy with Yan immediately, like a dog to a smell (101)," does not seem quite right in phrasing, or even the simile, but we accept it as her thinking and authentic.

Ultimately, I felt Min's writing detracted from the book overall, but only slightly. It is a good reminder that powerful writing does not need to be sophisticated in an overt manner.

Works Cited

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William2.1 says

I can recommend three excellent books on the late 20th-century Chinese experience. The first is Nien Cheng's *Life and Death in Shanghai*. This memoir begins with Cheng's victimization by the state at the onset of the "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution" in 1966. Harry Wu's *Bitter Winds: A Memoir of My Years in China's Gulag* starts earlier, just after the Communist victory and takeover of 1949. Wu's book is very good, but it does not rise to the literary level of Cheng's. Wu's mission was to expose the horrendous policy of slave labor as a means of increasing China's foreign exchange, and his book succeeds admirably in that respect while giving us his own story of near-death starvation and political persecution.

I'd always thought Cheng's book unassailable. But now I'm going to raise *Red Azalea* to a level equal with it. *Red Azalea* takes apart the Chinese Communist experience with much the same rigorous assurance shown by Cheng, but its approach, its style, is quite different.

Red Azalea is a hypnotic book. It was written by a native-Chinese speaker who decided to use the writing of her memoir as her means of learning English. She studied English independently on coming to America, too, which was said to have included regular viewings of "Sesame Street." Yet when I think of how hard the task of writing is in *any* language, when I think of how far Min has had to come, her achievement bowls me over. How did she do it? As we read we begin to sense how. Min possesses a powerful mind, and this was both her ball and chain, as well as the reason for her survival.

Naturally, no quasi-rational thinker could possibly live contentedly under such tyranny. Mao — insidiously — used children to carry out the national calamity known as the "Cultural Revolution." No one else in his and Madame Mao's view was ideologically pure enough. At the time Min was an impressionable young girl. Her formative years outside the home were filled by ranting, wooden-headed ideologues who would soon set

her — and millions of youngsters like her — loose on the “revisionist elements” and “capitalist sprouts” of Chinese society.

The memoir's first in-depth scene shows a Party secretary by the name of Chain, a mindless political cog, leading a “struggle meeting” against Min's beloved teacher, Autumn Leaves. Min can't be 12 here. Autumn Leaves's crime? Why, being born in the U.S. and teaching the subversive texts of Hans Christen Andersen. The teacher, an innocent of Chinese-American parentage, whose father loved China so much that he sent his only daughter back to the old country to be part of the great national resurgence, is manhandled by goons for being a “foreign spy” and forced to admit crimes which are nothing more than the calumnies of idiotic apparatchiks like Party Secretary Chain. One senses that the Autumn Leaves incident was in some sense the author's intellectual awakening. After this event, in which she was made to vociferously condemn her favorite teacher, she turns against the system.

Next we leap to age 18 or so, when Min was sent to Red Fire Farm, a collective farm on the Soviet model, near the East China Sea. Among those she meets there is Little Green, a beautiful, young woman who loves many of the things young women often love: makeup, nail polish, clothing, etc. The hours at Red Fire Farm are brutal: 5 am to 9 pm. The Party secretary is Yan, a woman with a massive physique who is legendary for her ability to haul great loads all day like an ox. Late in the wee hours one night Min and her barracks-mates are awakened and told to get their weapons and gear. Yan then leads her “soldiers” on a belly-crawl to a nearby stand of bamboo. Here sounds of sexual gratification fill the air. “Now,” Yan shouts, and at that instant all the young women snap on flashlights. There we see the bare-assed Little Green inflagrante delicto with a local man. “Rapist,” shouts Yan, “rapist.” Little Green, the victim, is whisked away. In short order the man is executed. In the coming weeks, Little Green goes insane. Her hygiene declines radically. When she returns to the farm from the asylum she is as “big as a bear,” presumably from medication, her great beauty destroyed.

Now, unaccountably, or so Min feels, she finds her own sexuality asserting itself. It puzzles her. Amid this amorphous desire, she finds herself drawn to the workhorse Yan who is also her superior. She knows Yan is to blame for Little Green's ruin, and she holds this against her, yet she cannot suppress her admiration for the woman. What follows are two beautiful stretches of portraiture. The first is of Comrade Lu, Yan's second in command, and a spewer of Maoist homilies. The other is of Yan herself. Yan lacks Lu's gift of revolutionary gab and suffers for it. Lu, who wants to bump Yan from her post, taunts her until Yan's inarticulateness explodes in curses. Apparatchik Lu sleeps with a skull which she kisses goodnight at lights out. Such are the head games and displays of Marxist-Leninist spunk that some of these revolutionaries adopt.

When Yan confesses her love for Leopard Lee, a young man running a nearby collective, Min writes letters in Yan's name and also serves as go between. But Lee isn't interested and doesn't reply. Long discussions ensue between Min and Yan as to why this might be. Perhaps he's busy, or, like Yan, simply not gifted with the pen. Their discussions intensify. They pull their sleeping rolls next to each other under the same mosquito net. With their minds bent toward the problem of Leopard Lee, they do not see their own growing physical attraction for each other. This is beautifully done. A mutual affection overcomes them almost unawares, and the reader wonders if he might not also be experiencing something akin to their own delight when they finally discover each other.

I usually dislike sex in literature for the simple reason that it isn't sex but text, a poor approximation of sexual experience. Almost always sex scenes seem grafted on in literature, like an excrescence, interrupting the flow of the story. Min's great achievement has been to make the lovemaking an integral part of the development of her characters. She produces erotic passages that I have read and reread, and yet I cannot see how they were done. There seems to be no artifice. Min's writing has the flatness of Wu and his cowriter,

Carolyn Wakeman, but Min possesses a lyrical gift as well so her English sings. I wondered if this was not simply what happens when the Chinese pictograph becomes English. For Min's writing, especially in the early sections, produces a lightly rhythmic, almost percussive effect. I've read many translations from the Chinese, and the works of many speakers like Ha Jin writing in English, and Min's achievement is unlike anything I've ever come across. It is either genius or some form of naïve mastery.

At this point in the narrative something fantastic happens. One day a car appears at the farm while Min and Yan and others are slaving in the fields. A retinue of five or six people emerge in crisp uniforms with clipboards. They're clearly from a higher Party echelon, an elite one. It turns out they are scouts searching for the raw talent who will ultimately play the role of the great Chinese female revolutionary, Red Azalea. At first it feels like a Hollywood story arc has been plunked down in the midst of the wretched collective farm. I confess I worried that the book would now turn into a familiar rags to riches tale, that we would now follow Min on her triumphal progress. (Min was eventually spirited off to America by Joan Chen, a fine actress perhaps best known for her work in Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor*.) That, thankfully, doesn't happen.

When Min returns to Shanghai, her hometown, where she will complete the competition for the role of Red Azalea at a local film studio, the deceit and political backstabbing reach new lows. Min is viewed as the ideal peasant type to play Red Azalea, the politically correct choice. The others thus fear her "ideological" purity and quickly move to smear her as a "capitalist sprout" and "revisionist element." Nothing could be further from the truth. Yet marshaled against her is an older actress, Soviet Wong, who studied acting long ago in Moscow, but whose style is now too polished and professional — too Western — and so she is out of favor. Her machinations, her base cruelty and underhandedness astounds the reader and makes the skull-kissing Lu seem a veritable girl scout.

Now we come to the most extraordinary part of the book. I don't want to say too much about it. This closing section centers on Min's growing relationship with the man known as the Supervisor. I was dazzled by Min's interchanges with the Supervisor, who was part of Madame Mao's — Jiang Qing's — Beijing circle. Suffice it to say that the language of sexual desire and longing she used so effectively when describing her earlier relationship with Yan becomes, perhaps because of her improved English, almost exponentially more intense. The way their love has to hide itself away here, the way it has to go underground because of the Supervisor's high political standing, approaches the tragic.

Red Azalea is a masterpiece of emotional honesty. One never sees where it's going. I will read it again — and perhaps again. For admirers of Nien Cheng's *Life and Death in Shanghai* it is essential reading. Prepare yourselves, some of you, the lucky ones, for an extraordinary literary experience.

Horace Derwent says

with the autograph of the author

Akemi G. says

This book gives us the internal view of Mao China, its Cultural Revolution, the life in a society most Americans are unfamiliar with. That's certainly interesting. For me, however, this book is about being human. The government suppresses people's natural feelings, over and over, with overwhelming authoritative power, and yet, they cannot help being human. People still fall in love. They seek out beauty. They find joy in seemingly little things.

The author intentionally leaves much unsaid. For instance, I don't think she really is unaware of her lover's later life . . . she just cannot write about it.

Hope the author is doing well these days.

P.S. It seems this book, among many, is banned in China. Check out this list:
<https://www.goodreads.com/list/show/4...>

Yvette says

When I first started to read it, I found that I had to put it down several times within the first couple chapters, because the voice and imagery in the story resonated so clearly to me - it was so heartbreakingly violent, confusing and upsetting (despite my not being raised in China nor during the Cultural Revolution.) I think it resembled a similar cultural divide that I had experienced as a 1st Generation Chinese American, growing up in New York and being raised by my grandparents. Often, what happened culturally, inside our home and even in my head were far different from things that happened in public school or even in my neighbors' yards. However, as I kept on reading, I found that I couldn't put the book down. The events and emotions, they way Anchee Min describes them, are so vivid and accurate. I really felt like I shared her pain, joy, lust, disappointment and relief. I also felt like I finally understood what it must have been like for my parents to grow up in that era in China and how that has affected them as adults. Highly recommended read.

Michael Arden says

Irony builds upon irony in this autobiography of the best-selling Chinese historical novelist, Anchee Min. During the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, a time which Chairman Mao coined as "permanent revolution," the Chinese people are totally oppressed and required to conform in a way crippling to the human spirit. Young Ms. Min is a naïve middle school student living with her family in a cramped apartment in Shanghai when she is recruited to become a Red Guard. First she is required to denounce her dedicated elderly teacher, who devotes her life to her students, whom Min both likes and respects. Amid the confusion and terror that rages around her and her family, she is selected to be sent to a collective farm near the seacoast called Red Fire Farm. Her parents and siblings, also reeling from the severe oppression of the times, are unable to help her escape a fate of back-breaking labor, as thousands of young people are sent to collective farms to literally get them out of the way. Even Chairman Mao realized he had created a monster with the Red Guard, who with all the unbridled energy of youth, were by the late 1960s bringing China to the brink of chaos.

During her austere and spirit-stifling time on the collective farm, where poor soil could not even make the

farm self-sustaining, and where fraternization between young men and women could lead to a death sentence, she falls in love with Yan, her heroic female company commander. The pair has a passionate sexual relationship that if discovered would immediately lead to their arrests. At its most critical point, their terribly intense affair is interrupted after Min is "discovered" and selected to compete for the lead part in a film based on an opera called "Red Azalea" created by Chairman Mao's wife, Comrade Jiang Ching. She transfers back to a Shanghai film studio, where she encounters the hatred and resentment of her mentor, Soviet Wong, an aging film actress and faded beauty. Eventually losing the role to a dynamic rival, Min is forced to wield a mop and perform manual labor in the studio in order to shame her and break her spirit. Mysteriously, the big official sent from Beijing to supervise the production, known only as the Supervisor, a personal friend and advisor of Comrade Jiang Ching, is attracted by the mixture of rebellion, intense suffering, and bold individualism he sees in Min to the point where they become soul mates. Once again Min begins an intense relationship until both become wrapped up in the turbulent events shaking China to its very foundations. Min's erotically charged story is at its most basic level a triumph of the human spirit in the face of unbelievable, soul-killing oppression at the hands of a cruel dictatorship. It is quite a strange story, perhaps especially to Americans, penned by a most unusually perceptive author who writes poetically in her adopted language, English.

Kavita says

Red Azalea is supposed to be Anchee Min's memoir of her life in China. The name is taken from a propaganda opera in which Min acted. The book is divided into three sections, which deals with different phases in the author's life.

The writing is stilted. Reading short sentences for 300 pages was a chore. The author also does not use quotations, so the book is really hard to read. There are hundreds of "she said" and "I said" scattered over every page and separated only by commas, and sometimes not even that. There are times when I could not make out who was speaking because of this style of writing. In short, very badly written.

She said she welcomed us to break out of the small world of our personal concerns to be part of an operation on such a grand scale. She said that we had just made our first step of the Long March. Suddenly raising her voice, she said that she wanted to introduce herself. She said, My name is Yan Sheng. Yan, as in discipline; Sheng, as in victory. You can call me Yan. She said she was the Party secretary and commander of this company. A company that was making earth-shaking changes in everything

There were some really horrible metaphors, which made me cringe. Seriously, who writes descriptions like this?

She said, As always, you know me better than the worms in my intestine.

She had a small thin mouth. So small that it looked like the anus of my hen Big Beard.

The ears of grain were thin, thinner than mice shit, heaped around my feet, heaped up, burying me.

Disgusting!

The first part of the memoir was about the author's childhood. It was really interesting and absorbing. There

was this keen interest for the reader on what was going to come. Some of the experiences suffered by the author and her family aroused my sympathy. If I only had to rate the book on this section alone, I would have rated it 3.

The second part deals with Min being sent to Red Fire Farm, a slave labour camp to which every family needed to contribute a slave. The beginning of this section was quite interesting with descriptions of farm life and how people dealt with the propaganda, the cut-throat business of survival and working from five in the morning to nine at night. After this, the author begins to talk about a lesbian affair she had, and the story dramatically falls in quality and interest. It takes on a romance-porn quality from which it never recovers. The fact that the bulk of the book is devoted to the romance does not help matters. It is boring, and I do not care.

The third section is about Min being selected to perform in an opera. Pining for ex-lesbian lover, petty cat fights between the various opera girls, and another boring romance with a man, makes up the bulk of this section. By the time we reach the end, Mao is dead and the author chooses to cover this momentous event in just one page. One page! Out of more than 300 pages, just one is devoted to Mao's death, while she went on and on and on about her boring affairs. This is really bad story telling from any perspective.

The author even fails to talk about her friends and family and how the Cultural Revolution affected them. Beyond the really short first section, her family just provide a background for her to pine for her lovers or to complain about her opera comrades. All the momentous political events taking place around her are completely left out. What happened to her parents, her siblings are not detailed. Nothing of interest is explored in the book. Just pages and pages of her two romantic experiences. In the end, I ceased to care about the author or her experiences. I might as well have read a Mills & Boon instead!

I do not recommend this book to anyone. There are much better books on slave labour, Cultural Revolution, China, and romance.
