

Love in a Fallen City

Eileen Chang (Translator) , Karen S. Kingsbury (Translator)

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Eileen Chang is one of the great writers of twentieth-century China, where she enjoys a passionate following both on the mainland and in Taiwan. At the heart of Chang's achievement is her short fiction—tales of love, longing, and the shifting and endlessly treacherous shoals of family life. Written when Chang was still in her twenties, these extraordinary stories combine an unsettled, probing, utterly contemporary sensibility, keenly alert to sexual politics and psychological ambiguity, with an intense lyricism that echoes the classics of Chinese literature. *Love in a Fallen City*, the first collection in English of this dazzling body of work, introduces American readers to the stark and glamorous vision of a modern master.

Love in a Fallen City Details

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From Reader Review Love in a Fallen City for online ebook

Mizuki says

Edited@23/01/2015: I made some new discoveries during the re-reading of this book, I feel for a few time the author had overdone her beautiful writing, but outside of this, it's still a worthy collection of short stories.

Love In a Fallen City is a collection of Chang's most well known novella: Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier, Love In a Fallen City, The Golden Cangue, Sealed Off and Red Rose, White Rose. So fine are these stories, I suggest that if you planned to read only one single book by Chinese female author for once in your entire life, read Love In the Fallen City. This book is no doubt the best of the very best which had ever been penned by a Chinese female author. Although I admit some readers might need time to grow fond of Miss Chang's novellas.

Miss Chang's works would also give you much insight on ordinary Chinese people, their everyday affairs and the modern Chinese middle class society in the 1940 era. (PS: Miss Chang was a young lady in her 20s when she published her most successful short stories in the wartime Shanghai)

Many readers might mistake Miss Chang's short stories as 'romance' because most of them deal with relationship between Chinese men and women in the 1940s Shanghai city, and Miss Chang's works shows a heavy influence from Chinese romance classic such as Story Of the Stone (also named Dream In the Red Chamber). But in fact disillusion of romantic love, family relationship and friendship seem to be a more common and dominating theme for Miss Chang's novellas.

The titled act Love In a Fallen City, considered by many as one of Miss Chang's masterpieces, is also one of the few Chang's stories to have a slightly happier ending. The heroine was the divorced daughter from a decaying Shanghai family, her 'love interest' a wealthy playboy who refused to settle down. The author told us: "She was but a selfish woman, he was just a selfish man". She was looking for a way out from her family and a meal ticket, he only wanted good company and a good time in Hong Kong, but as Hong Kong came under Japanese army's attack, their feeling toward each other started to change. In my opinion, Love In a Fallen City is a 'game of love' in every sense, the author successfully created a heroine who was down-to-earth, clever, calculating, fragile and sympathetic at the same time.

Some other reader might also mistake Miss Chang for a feminist author, but please make no mistake here. Although Miss Chang would no doubt agree with many things feminists have to say about gender equality, but readers must bear in mind that many, if not most female characters in Chang's novellas are no feminists. Although many of Chang's female characters are determined and strong-willed, still hardly any of them show awareness or try to fight against the social and cultural inequality. Instead of showing awareness or independence, Miss Chang's female characters display different levels of mental and/or material dependence, on their male counterparts. From time to time, such kind of male and female's relationship is pretty painful to look at, but there's no denying Miss Chang's description of relationship is quite a realistic one.

Therefore it's refreshing to see among the crew of suppressed, struggling female characters, Wang Jiaorui, a married woman in Red Rose, White Rose, who was cruelly abandoned by the lover of her extra-marital affair, eventually raised up from humiliation and became a stronger person in the end.

Miss Chang's works always show a deep understanding on human nature and relationships, which helps to

put insight into her novellas and help them raised from mere romance to worthy literature which are still widely admired and recognized decades after her passing.

N. says

Another one bites the dust.

First story is Aloeswood Incense. Lovely but bittersweet. Love is a dangerous drug. 3.5/5.

Second story: Jasmine Tea. OMFG. What an unlikeable, heinous character, rendering this short story practically unreadable. 0.5/5 stars.

That last story soured the entire reading experience for me. I knew this book wasn't for me after I realized that I refused to bring it in my commute to and from the uni. I downright preferred to stare into nothingness than continue reading this book. The two stories I managed to finish are bitter and there is no semblance of hope in any of them.

I'm sorry, but I am in no mood to keep misery company. I prefer to read *anything* other than this.

Time to Paperbackswap this title.

Jaclyn Woods says

I'm always fascinated by customs that are different to my own and I found the old family structures expressed in Chang's short stories very interesting. I sometimes feel like there is more of a slow beauty in Chinese writing, longer descriptions, which are so different to the cliches I'm used to and a focus on beauty in a different way, especially when it comes to those of colours, or people's features.

It's interesting to see how the difficulties faced by women in history have strong similarities, transcending culture or country. Chang's female characters face issues mainly revolving around a lack of control of their own lives and a need to marry and marry well (and thus fall under the control of someone new). The short stories also explore issues of class, and the difficulty of moving "up" in society during these times. The short stories offer the escapism of romance, but also a lesson on many issues of an older China (and new? I have no idea, but would be most interested to learn more about the changes in China since this time).

At the same time, when reading Chang's book I often wondered whether I grasped everything or whether my vastly different upbringing left me distanced from the messages within it. All the same, I thoroughly enjoyed this book.

Alex says

Part of my Fall 2017 Best Of Chinese Literature project; more here, and a cool list of books here.

Eileen Chang, "arguably China's most influential female writer," was a scholar of English literature, which

gives *Love in a Fallen City* an interesting kind of familiarity. The setting is different, but we've seen the plot before. This is the one about the seducer and the fallen woman.

Liusu is divorced - used goods. When a wealthy playboy flirts with her, she's torn: flattered but wary. But she agrees to go with him to Hong Kong, where, soon enough, she finds herself ensnared. He casually creates the perception that she's his mistress, so her reputation is done for anyway; she can now keep her honor but only to herself, or become a mistress in fact as well and at least get some temporary financial benefit.

Chang was writing in the 1940s, and what you hear is Victorian novels. The rake is an invention of Victorian prudishness; this sort of scenario was already unfashionable. So the big twist in this one is welcome, and it's the only sort of twist that could really have surprised me: (view spoiler) So that makes this a strange and beautiful little story; it's packed with subtlety and ambiguity and it isn't what you thought it was. The Millions says Chang "combined [Joan] Didion's glamor and sensibility with the terrific wit of Evelyn Waugh. She could, with a single phrase, take you hostage." That doesn't quite ring it for me - I'm not really sure where we got Didion, other than glamour. (I mean, look at her:

Glamour indeed.) But I've only read the one thing. Maybe she's got more up her sleeve.

Alberto Delgado says

No suelo leer mucha literatura asiática y china aún menos y lo poco que he leído hasta ahora casi siempre ha sido de japon, pero este pequeño libro me llamó la atención por el título y por estar editado por asteroide que no me suele defraudar. El libro contiene dos relatos en los que la autora nos cuenta dos historias situadas en los años 40 del pasado siglo consiguiendo de forma brillante describir la sociedad china de esa época y su formas sociales. Me ha gustado pero tengo que decir que me ha sabido a poco , tal vez por mi falta de costumbre de leer a autores de ese continente con su peculiar forma de narrar tan diferente al de los autores europeos o americanos que es lo que suelo leer habitualmente y también por que los relatos cortos no me suelen enganchar de la misma forma que las novelas.

Hadrian says

Funny that this is translated 'Love in a Fallen City'. ?? has connotations of attachment or longing, not just love (?). Not to mention 'Fallen City' (??) is also allusive, referring not just to beauty and allure, but also something so beautiful that it leads to the downfall of a state (the full phrase being ????). Then again, how could you be expected to translate all of this in the title without putting footnotes on the front cover?

When I was going through this collection, I felt that I was reading the same story written five or six times. Love and longing in a colonial city on the border between the Western World and China, family disputes, and lamenting the loss of youth or independence. But this is the same excellent story written five or six times, so I can't really dispute it. Although the title reference is explicitly political, politics takes a background to the more subtle details of family disputes and internal thoughts. Only in the title story, where love blossoms in a city now seized by the Japanese, we now see the stark contrast between political collapse

and personal satisfaction.

These are stories not so much about the romantic ideals of love, but people playing with the games of love, or people so lonesome or caught up in their own troubles that love seems out of reach and cannot cure their woes. In reading these, you feel a painful sense of longing, and a sense of lonely people trying to find a place of refuge in the midst of chaos.

Inderjit Sanghera says

The incandescence of moonlight permeates Eileen Chang's prose, her stories tinged with the half-light of heartbreak and centred upon the lives of mainly upper or middle class Chinese women in the mid 20th century. Although it would be disingenuous to label Chang as a writer whose novels are centred on feminism, she certainly actively explores the role of women in what was a patriarchal society-from the stifling nature of social conventions surrounding a woman's role in Chinese society, to all of the prejudices and inhibitions which women faced, Chang's female characters have rich and well-developed emotional lives. Not that all of them are positive-in fact few, if any, of the characters in any of the stories could be considered positive or likeable, instead they all seem to be trapped in their selfishness or self-absorption-as in the case of the 'Mistresses' in 'The Golden Cangue' or naive and weak as in the case of Weilong in 'Aloeswood Incense'. Yet, trapped within the narrow confines of a woman's position in Chinese society at the time, it is easy to understand why the Mistresses-who have little to no outside life outside of their homes are so insular and why Weilong, who has had no chance to encounter romance before meeting the conniving playboy George Qiao can seem so naive and emotionally underdeveloped. Her physical descriptions of the female character brings out the ephemeral beauty they radiate;

"One of Madame Liang's delicate hands held the banana leaf by the stem. As she twirled around, thin rays of light shone through the slits in the leaf, spinning across her face."

On the other hand, the male characters, who come from positions of power, often come across as narrow-minded bullies or, in the case of Chaunjing malevolent and deeply insecure. Chang actively tries to explore the more negative aspect of the human condition, her stories tinged with sadness and the sorrows of love and human relationships.

"To young people the moon of thirty years ago should be a reddish-yellow wet stain the size of a copper coin., like a teardrop on a letter...In the old people's memory the moon of thirty years ago was gay, larger and white than the moon now. But looked back after thirty years of on a rough road, the best of moons is apt to be tinged with sadness."

Chang writes beautifully, her metaphors, such as the following are unusual and beautiful and obviously influenced by the poets of the Chinese Tang Dynasty;

"The moon had just risen; it was dark and yellow, like the scorch mark left on jade-green satin when a burning ash of incense falls on somebody's needlework"

In addition to this, Chang is able to give the world in which her stories take place depth, via her painterly descriptions of the natural world;

"It was almost dawn. The flat waning moon got lower, lower and large and by the time it sank, it was like a

red gold basin. The sky was a cold bleak crab-shell blue. At the horizon the morning colours were a layer of green, a layer of yellow and a layer of red like a watermelon cut open-the sun was coming up.”

Chang’s stories are visually stunning explorations of the lives of upper and middle class Chinese society, often from the point of view of women and represent a unique synthesis of Chinese poetry and Western narrative styles. She easily stands with other great short story writers of the 20th century, such as Katherine Mansfield, Salinger and Alice Munro and should really be read more widely.

Paul says

4.5 stars

This comprises of four novellas and two short stories; written by Chang in the 1940s. They contain opposites in tension (spiritual and physical love, East against West, tradition clashing with modernity). The effects of war and western influences are never very far away. The settings revolve around Hong Kong and Shanghai. Chang was not immune to the tensions in her own country and despite initial success in her own country, when she was forced to move to the US she struggled to relaunch her career. She died a recluse in 1995. There is an acidity to the writing which is delightful and Chang has a perceptive way of building and showing character. In the title story a young divorcee is falling in love with a wealthy playboy; “Whenever they were in public, he made sure to give the impression of affectionate intimacy, so now there was no way to prove that they had not slept together”

When he gives her up and despair sets in her family’s response is telling;

“People who don’t have money can’t just give up, even if they want to. Shave your head, become a nun, and when you beg for alms, you’ll still have to deal with people.”

Chang’s powers of description are also very powerful; one of the stories begins;

“The tramcar driver drove his tram, the tramcar tracks, in the blazing sun, shimmered like two shiny worms oozing out from water: stretch, then shrink, stretch, then shrink. Soft and slippery, long old worms, slinking on and on and on ... the driver stared at the wriggling rails, and did not go mad.”

But most of all Chang looks at the role women in a changing world; trapped by social constraints and a very limited supply of options. Some of the characters fail, others succeed to an extent, but Chang creates memorable and convincing characters who command attention.

Although Chang is better known now; she still does not get the attention she deserves and she certainly does deserve a wider audience.

Jorge Cienfuegos says

Como dice la propia autora, son historias "corrientes", nada que no se haya leído antes, así que la belleza reside en la prosa. Me gusta mucho como escribe esta señora, por lo que la lectura ha sido más que satisfactoria. He disfrutado más la novela corta que le da título al libro que el relato que va después, pero supongo que eso ya es cuestión de gustos.

El says

Currently spinning:

Li Xianglan
Old-Shanghai-Mix

Before Amy Tan, there was Eileen Chang. Chang did in the early 20th century what Tan wants to do today - write stories that convey the relationships between men and women, old traditions vs. new, traditional vs. modernity. Chang did it with substantial grace. I've liked Tan, but I realize now what I was missing. (Not that it's fair to make comparisons, so I won't here.)

These six stories included in this collection are hard at times to read due to their poignancy; but at other times, the prose is so heartbreakingly beautiful that it's hard to turn away. I purposely read this collection slowly so I could savor each phrase as it felt (evident even through the translations) that Chang chose each word with such precision. It's a strong collection, but it also feels fragile, delicate, cold, like something that belongs in a museum.

Upon the translucent blue silk umbrella myriad raindrops twinkled blue like a skyful of stars that would follow them about later on the taxi's glistening front window of crushed silver and, as the car ran through red and green lights, a nestful of red stars would fly humming outside the window and a nestful of green stars.

(p224, *The Golden Cangue*)

There's more of Chang's writing out there, and I hope to one day read more of it. She and her brother were the last in their family and they are both dead now - I don't often wish there was a next generation that might choose to take up writing, but in this case, I did.

Louise says

Eileen Chang connects this collection of short stories together by the common theme of troubled relationships. The turmoil of the relationships in these stories mirror the changes taking part in China during that time.

While I always felt a sense of dread when starting each new story, knowing that it'll never end in happily ever after, I was also eager to see what twists and turns the characters would go through in their quest for love.

Laura says

Contents:

3*Jasmine Tea

4*Love in a Fallen City

3*The Golden Cangue

2*Sealed Off

3*Red Rose, White Rose

This is my first book that I've read by this author and I really liked it. See my ratings for each story.

Dioni (Bookie Mee) says

Mee's rating: 4.5/5

Review first published at: <http://www.meexia.com/bookie/2010/07/...>

Love in a Fallen City was picked for our Asian Book Group. It's a perfect selection after *The Good Earth*, because both women wrote in the same era, both about China. Buck is even mentioned in the Introduction by Karen S. Kingsbury, the translator.

"[Chang] tried , with little success, to break into the English-language fiction market... But the cultural and linguistic gaps were to wide to cross. As C. T. Hsia, one of her earliest and most perceptive advocates, remarked, mid-century American readers' views of China were greatly influenced by writers like Pearl S. Buck, which left them unprepared for Chang's melancholy incisiveness and insider's perspective."

Don't you find it ironic that the real Chinese was less accepted? Once I started, I could sort of see why. While Buck concentrated on the poor rural life, Chang wrote about the middle to high class Chinese society. From Westerners perspective, the tale of misery from a third world country might be more exotic than the intricacies of ordinary Chinese life and relationships.

The first story, **Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier**, quickly set an image in my head as *Pride and Prejudice* in Hong Kong. There are parties and courtships, and people are measuring someone's worth from how much he/she owns or earns. But unlike P&P, it's not a feel-good romantic story, a pattern that will follow throughout the rest of the book.

Chang's stories may be about love, but it may be love you're not familiar with. The stories are essentially-- borrowing words from the Introduction-- "anti-romance". Every single character is calculative--a very Chinese trait I think. I likened it to watching a game of chess, or a game whose rules I'm not very familiar with, so it's required of me to pay attention to details, to what is said between the lines, to things they say and not say, to little gestures. I love the intricacies, the power play, and complexity of the relationships. This is almost unheard of for short story collection, but I loved all the stories in the book. The more I read the more I love Chang's writing and the more I appreciate her skills in building these tales of life.

Chang wrote film scripts apart from short stories and novels, so it's little wonder that her strength in this aspect shines through. Her writing is often cinematic, it's almost like she wrote with a big screen in mind. **Jasmine Tea**, her second story in the book started with a cup of tea:

"This pot of jasmine tea that I've brewed for you may be somewhat bitter; this Hong Kong tale that I'm about to tell you may be, I'm afraid, just as bitter. Hong Kong is a splendid city, but a sad one too."

First pour yourself a cup of tea, but be careful--it's hot! Blow on it gently. In the tea's curling steam you can see... a Hong Kong public bus on a paved road, slowly driving down a hill. A

passenger stands behind the driver, a big bunch of azaleas in his arms. The passenger leans against an open window, the azaleas stream out in a twiggy thicket, and the windowpane behind becomes a flat sheet of red."

In *Jasmine Tea*, we follow a young man who grows up in family with little love. Frustrated with his own father and stepmother, he starts to contemplate having a different father. He indulges in possibilities if her dead mother had married another man. All leads to dire consequences. The story is probably my least favorite because it's quite disturbing at the end.

Next is the title story, **Love in a Fallen City**, which was made into a movie with the same name in 1984, played by Chow Yun Fat (The King and I, Pirates of the Caribbean). I really wanted to see the movie, but it's an old movie and it's so hard to find with proper subtitle so I gave up looking. But I searched some clips on youtube and watched some to have a feel of the atmosphere during the time as I don't think I've ever watched a Chinese or Hong Kong movie from this era. I was especially intrigued by the clothes. During the time of reading, I had a hard time imagining the clothes they were wearing, so it was nice to see the clips and learned what they actually might look like. The story itself is one that most resembles a love story, with a man and a woman who find love in each other in the middle of turbulence and chaos.

In **The Golden Cangue**, we are faced with the epitome of evil mother and mother-in-law. She's a very strong character, but I almost couldn't stand to read on. Several times I needed to close my eyes and take a deep breath before continuing. Do you know what cangue is? Google it and check it out. It often appears in Chinese movies and only now I know the name of it. The title has great meaning in connection with the story.

My favorite stories happened to be the last two: *Sealed Off* and *Red Rose, White Rose*. In **Sealed Off**, the city is sealed off for unexplained reason and everybody is stuck at where they are until city is "re-opened" again. Camera pans to a tram, to the people in it, then is focused to a man and a woman. Two people meet by chance, forced to interact by circumstances. From the footnote of *Sealed Off*:

The military situation that creates this interlude is presented very obliquely; all that we know is that the authorities have shut down, or condoned off, all or part of the city. The authorities, in this case, are probably the Japanese occupiers or (more likely) the Chinese puppet government that answered to them. Chang made a point of never directly referring to the political or military situation in Shanghai prior to the defeat of the Japanese, and thus she usually escaped censorship and was never thrown in prison (as did befall those of her associates who took a more aggressive stance).

Interesting insight into the political situation of that time. Chang left China when she was 32 and for the next three decades was a banned writer in her homeland, though still much loved by loyal readers in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the overseas Chinese communities. *Sealed Off* is told to be one of the stories that impressed Hu Lancheng, an influential man of the time, that "he looked her up, swept her off her feet, and became her husband" (from the Introduction).

Last, another favorite of mine, is **Red Rose, White Rose**. It has such a great opening:

"There were two women in Zhenbao's life: one he called his white rose, the other his red rose. One was a spotless wife, the other a passionate mistress. Isn't that just how the average man describes a chaste widow's devotion to her husband's memory--as spotless, and passionate too?"

Maybe every man has had two such women--at least two. Marry a red rose and eventually she'll be a mosquito-blood streak smeared on the wall, while the white one is "moonlight in front of my bed." Marry a white rose, and before long she'll be a grain of sticky rice that's gotten stuck to your clothes; the red one, by then, is a scarlet beauty mark just over your heart."

Just brilliant.

This is the short story that was picked by *Jeffrey Eugenides* to be included in anthology he edited: *My Mistress's Sparrow is Dead*, whose short stories I've been reading and talking about here several times before.

Like Hong Kong the city, the recurrent theme in the book is fusion or clash between the East and the West. There are many mixed blood people make appearances or Chinese people who have spent a lot of time overseas. That and the progressive nature of the place and time, there bounds to be confusion and tension between the old and the new ways.

"Yanli rarely spoke or raised her head and always walked a little behind him. She knew very well that according to modern etiquette she should walk in front, left him help her put on her coat and wait on her, but she was uncomfortable exercising her new rights. She hesitated, and this made her seem even slower and more awkward." ~ Red Rose, White Rose, p294

Love in a Fallen City contains 6 short stories, 4 of which are sort of novella length, and I think they worked really well for me exactly because of that. The short stories are not too short, so there's time to develop the characters and the plot and there's time for you to get immersed in them. They're not perfect, as I found the dialogues sound a bit odd at times, but it's understandable as Chinese is a very sharp and short language (though sing-songy), so it must be hell to translate to a wordy language like English. Then the behaviours of the characters can sometimes be very abrupt which I didn't quite get. But all in all, what a great find. Thanks to Claire for picking this up, otherwise I may not have found it by myself. I will definitely look for more Chang's works in the future. She is a gem of the East.

Quotes

"No matter how amazing a woman is, she won't be respected by her own sex unless she's loved by a member of the opposite one. Women are petty this way." ~ Love in a Fallen City, p127

"Basically a woman who was tricked by a man deserved to die, while a woman who tricked a man was a whore. If a woman tried to trick a man but failed then was tricked by him, that was whoredom twice over. Kill her, and you'd only dirty the knife." ~ Love in a Fallen City, p152

"Even though status wasn't something you could eat, losing it would be a pity." ~ Love in a Fallen City, p153

"We were way too busy falling in love--how could we have found time to really love each other?" ~ Love in a Fallen City, p166

Kate Levin says

Beautiful but cold.

Aubrey says

4.5/5

In China, as elsewhere, the constraints imposed by the traditional moral code were originally constructed for the benefit of women: they made beautiful women even harder to obtain, so their value rose, and ugly women were spared the prospect of never-ending humiliation. Women nowadays don't have this kind of protective buffer, especially not mixed-blood girls, whose status is entirely undefined.

I love Pearl S. Buck, I really do, but the way her written legacy interfered with that of Eileen Chang's is a tragedy. Readers introduced through the Nobel Prize Winner to China would expect exacting honor, high drama, sultry romance, any other conjunction of the profligating misnomer known as the 'East'; even more absurd a concept when said readers are US bound and must look to the west for their fill of fiction. They would not have been satisfied with these short and biting works, bred on an entirely different culture with strains more akin to Fitzgerald and O'Connor than anything the historical fiction trends of the States could conjure up. And so we left yet another author to their own devices, till when dead and gone we could sift through and lift up their works in as fitting a posthumous manner as we please.

A bitter triumph both here and across the sea, for as an expatriate Chang was unjustly ignored, the only alternative to a home country banning. You'll find very little of such unsavory politickings here, an authorial choice that let her works alone before the government shifted and her wealthy background combined with lack of polemical interests chased her from Shanghai to Hong Kong and finally to LA to die alone in an apartment within my lifetime. It's a flavor of acrid living that she captured on paper even in her youthful twenties, as these stories are happiness of the trained sort, gilded robes and bound feet reminiscent of ruffled skirts and excised ribs in the land of Christians and their Boxer Rebellion. True, Shanghai is not Paris or London, Berlin or New York, but you don't need white people to play out the conflicts of modern life on a theme of hope and decadence, luxurious backdrops galore to the young choking on the old, women flying too far to forget the taste when time comes for men to clip their wings.

There's beauty, though, unfamiliar enough for me to spend a moment unraveling the colors and densities, landscapes heated to a different symphony of flora and fauna, living spaces enclosed within collections of wood and stone whose recognition comes only through many a visit to the houses of my friends, here in the Bay Area where the high school classes are 18% 'Caucasian' and the vernacular of ABC (American Born Chinese), banana (yellow on the out, white on the in), and egg (you get the picture) were the norm on campus grounds. This mix and meld of upbringing made me wish once to follow said friends on one of their summer retreats to kith and kin, a wish revitalized by what I knew within these pages and the far more that I didn't. I know my poor head for languages too well to ever hope to grasp the five thousand plus characters of the Chinese language, but the excursion would provide sorely needed grounding of contextual reality for my abstract intake, if nothing else. That, and reading *The Story of the Stone*, whose pervasive influence apparent even in this literature of the 20th century has shoved it forward a few hundred in the shelves.

The white Liang mansion was melting viscously into the white mist, leaving only the greenish

gleam of the lamplight shining through square after square of the green windowpanes, like ice cubes in peppermint schnapps. When the fog thickened, the ice cubes dissolved, and the lights went out.

Keep an eye on that NYRB cover, Ah Xian's *China, China: Bust 34* in profile. It conveys the book better than I ever could.

Lisa says

Eileen Chang (1920-1995) was a Chinese writer whose life was profoundly affected by the upheavals of the 20th century. I have just read one of her most famous works, a novella entitled *Love in a Fallen City*.

Born in Shanghai into the instability of the nationalist Sun Yat-sen Republic, Chang's early life was a microcosm of the conflict between conservatives and modernists. Humiliations on the international stage led intellectuals in China to champion reforms in thinking, while reactionary forces were nostalgic for the old certainties of Confucianism. For Chang, this dichotomy meant a traumatic childhood.

Her father, of aristocratic lineage, was an opium addict with a propensity for domestic violence, while her mother, an independent woman open to Western ideas, abandoned the family for Europe for part of Chang's childhood when he took a concubine. But she eventually returned, and when the father was hospitalised after a morphine overdose, the mother's European aspirations influenced a more liberal education for her daughter, broadening it to include art, music and English. However on the father's release the destructive cycle of domestic conflict resumed, and after the inevitable divorce, Chang had to divide her time between her father's opium den and her mother's modern apartment.

When she was eighteen, Chang fled her father's cruelty. By 1939 she was studying Literature at the University of Hong Kong and hoping to go London, but the Japanese invaded in 1941. She had to return to her mother's apartment in occupied Shanghai,

Remarkably, Chang's literary career flourished under the Japanese. Shanghai was a city bustling with new ideas, but the literary coterie either abandoned the city or chose to lie low under the Occupation. Chang, however, stepped into the limelight and began publishing stories and essays, becoming very popular and staying out of trouble with the authorities by masking her work as 'unserious'. Her first fiction collection, 'Romances' was published in 1944 and her essays 'Written on Water', in 1945.

Love in a Fallen City is not a romance novel as it is commonly understood. It is a tale of love and longing, but the tone is dark and melancholy, even though Sixth Sister Liusu gets her man...

The Bai family are conservatives who don't answer the door after dark because that's against the rules of the 'old etiquette'.

Fourth Master sat still and listened, but since Third Master, Third Mistress, and Fourth Mistress were shouting all at once as they came up the stairs, he couldn't understand what they were saying. Sitting in the room behind the balcony were Sixth Young Lady, Seventh Young Lady, and Eighth Young Lady, along with the Third and Fourth Masters' children, all growing increasingly anxious. (p. 111)

But it turns out that it's old Mrs Xu with news about Liusu's ex-husband. He's caught pneumonia and died,

which the family immediately sees as an opportunity to get rid of her. The rules of etiquette don't seem to apply to family members: the gloves are off in the battle to humiliate Liusu for the failure of her marriage. Now that they have spent the money she brought back after her divorce, they resent what she costs them:

Sure, in the past, it was no problem. One more person, two more chopsticks, that's all. But these days? (p. 113)

The extended family gang up on her, wanting her to return as a 'widow' to her ex-husband's family so that she will be off their hands. But Liusu has more modern ideas, and she laughs off the suggestion that she should go into mourning for him.

To read the rest of my review please visit <http://anzlitlovers.com/2013/08/24/lo...>

Isidora says

I am always interested in worlds that are different to my own and so I started to read my first book written by a Chinese author. The collection of stories by Eileen Chang set in Shanghai and Hong Kong in the 1940s. These are tales of love, loss and longing. On a wider cover, they deal with conflicts between tradition and modernity, old and new China, ancient customs and foreign manners. Men and particularly women never find happiness, women have to overcome hundred troubles before they can get married (and marry well), separation from another human being is a fact, people lack control of their own lives. Such is life in these stories. Pretty universal, isn't it? Yet I wonder if I got everything, if I caught all the subtleties. Maybe it is my lack of knowledge about China that keeps me distanced. Maybe it is my warm southern upbringing mixed with my Nordic pragmatic adult reality, which is very different from customs in the book, maybe it is the mystery of Far East. Whatever the reason is, I can't say that I got the whole picture. On the other hand, I really, really

love the writing. It reminds me of Edith Wharton in its precision and love for details, and sometimes it is so beautiful that it hurts. Four stars I give to the book for the gorgeous writing but Eileen Chung deserves a better reader than I am at the moment.

The last will probably only my fellow ex-YU GR members understand: I didn't understand men and women in the book in the same way I have never truly understood why Hasanaginica could not pay a visit to the wounded Hasanaga in his white tent.

Hugh says

I wanted to read this because it appeared on the Powell's list of **25 books to read before you die** which also includes several of my favourite books. *[See below for the full list]:*

This is a collection of stories set in Hong Kong and Shanghai in the 30s and 40s. It is rich in local colour and period detail, but I found it a little difficult to warm to, perhaps because the culture Chang describes seems

very alien to a modern western eye.

Appendix: Powell's 25 books to read before you die: world edition

Read:

Half of a Yellow Sun by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie Nigeria

The Master and Margarita by Mikhail Bulgakov Russia

Invisible Cities by Italo Calvino Italy

Love in a Fallen City by Eileen Chang China

Life and Times of Michael K by J.M. Coetzee South Africa

Hopscotch by Julio Cortázar Argentina

The Summer Book by Tove Jansson Finland

Independent People by Halldór Laxness Iceland

A Heart So White by Javier Marías Spain

A Fine Balance by Rohinton Mistry India

A Wild Sheep Chase by Haruki Murakami Japan

Life: A User's Manual by Georges Perec France

Blindness by José Saramago Portugal

The Rings of Saturn by W.G. Sebald Germany

Unread:

Rashomon and Seventeen other Stories by Ryunosuke Akutagawa Japan

Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster by Svetlana Alexievich Belarus

Gabriela, Clove and Cinnamon by Jorge Amado Brazil

My Brilliant Friend by Elena Ferrante Italy

Mirrors: Stories of Almost Everyone by Eduardo Galeano Uruguay

Too Loud a Solitude by Bohumil Hrabal Czech Republic

The Bone People by Keri Hulme New Zealand

Annie John by Jamaica Kincaid Antigua

Near to the Wild Heart by Clarice Lispector Brazil

Cities of Salt by Abdul Rahman Munif Saudi Arabia

The Street of Crocodiles and Other Stories by Bruno Schulz Poland

Tony says

Hong Kong in the 1940s. Chinese customs and English manners. Eileen Chang transported me to that fusion, helped me understand it in a way that a mere history would not. Chang looks for the symbols, not just for us, but for her characters too. There are recurrent images. A man clutches azaleas on a bus, the red coloring the window. A young man sees this and rests his head on his own cold window. Later he will see red azaleas outside the window at his home, and rest his head on a cool table top. In another story:

The wall was cool and rough, the color of death. Pressed against the wall, her face bloomed with the opposite hues: red lips, shining eyes--a face of flesh and blood, alive with thought and feeling.

You could read these stories as feminist tract. You could read it as life, everyday life of real people, while the War looms. You could read it as a search for love, tantalizingly just out of reach. Is it possible for us to ever

understand one another?

Life was like the Bible, translated from Hebrew to Greek, from Greek to Latin, from Latin to English, from English to Mandarin Chinese. When Cuiyuan read it, she translated the Mandarin into Shanghainese. Some things did not come through.

There is a story called *Red Rose, White Rose*. It is not a story of adultery, not really, more a story of what might have been:

There were two women in Zhenbao's life: one he called his white rose, the other his red rose. ... Maybe every man has had two such women--at least two. Marry a red rose and eventually she'll be a mosquito-blood streak smeared on the wall, while the white one is "moonlight in front of my bed." Marry a white rose, and before long she'll be a grain of sticky rice that's gotten stuck to your clothes; the red one, by then, is a scarlet beauty mark just over your heart. (Hint: like the azaleas, the moonlight, here, should be followed.)

My favorite story was *Sealed Off*. A tramcar stops suddenly. Unspoken, that looming War is the cause. *"Ding-ding-ding" rang the bell. Each "ding" was a small, cold dot: dot after dot, they formed a line that cut through space and time. Dots? Yes, the tram is full of people. Dots in a line. What do we do when the tramcar stops? People who had newspapers read newspapers; those who didn't have newspapers read receipts, or rules and regulations, or business cards. People who were stuck without a single scrap of printed matter read shop signs along the street. They simply had to fill this terrifying emptiness--otherwise, their brains might start working. Thinking is painful business. (That's why I always take a book.) Eventually one dot leaves the line. A man. He goes to talk to a woman. Small, cold dots.*

Ding-ding-ding. Ding-ding-ding.

Nicole~ says

Eileen Chang's (Ailing Zhang) stories, first published collectively as *Romances*, recreate in Love in a Fallen City a view of Chinese culture and society of the 1940s through keen observations of a fading traditional world. Chang's anthology of Chinese life offers a bleak yet insightful analysis of male and female natures, domestic roles, moral values and self-centered relationships, masterfully depicting in elegant prose a past struggling to maintain control against a revolutionizing present.

The title story, *Love in a Fallen City*, is a tale of two cities in transition - old Shanghai and modern Hong Kong - with the Japanese invasion of 1941 as a subtly structured backdrop, and owns one of Chang's rare hopeful endings. Over the stale atmosphere of an oppressive household, a *huqin* wails its melancholic tune of a heroine who endures the stigma of divorce and the spiteful pettiness and jealousy of her relatives. *Fealty and filial piety, chastity and righteousness* fill the life that mundanely ticks away on the dry, wrinkled hands of *the old clock*. Bai Liusu's daily life, bowing to the ways of old, is a suffocating *'tale too desolate for words.'* She grabs a chance to flee Shanghai to cosmopolitan Hong Kong, to explore freedom from the restrictions of an antiquated life, but steps in the diverting path of Liuyuan - a Western-educated man, refined, egotistic and traditionally chauvinistic. Old gender stereotypes distort a budding romance but, as long-established barriers crumble: a dutiful, prostrating woman might find love in the ashes of a razed city, if the game is played right.

Chang, a scholar of *The Dream of The Red Chamber*, sculpts her literary aesthetics with the sophisticated style of the Chinese classics whose heroines, bound by old feudal systems, pine idealistically for pure love while pessimism darkens their nature and desolation overshadows their existence. In *The Golden Cangue* - her most dismal story in contrast to LFC and more implicit in her denouncement of a degrading social system - Chang draws images of 'that -thing- around -your -neck' metaphor for the enslavement and control of its wearer, exploring how human nature degenerates when left in morally putrefied surroundings. Ch'i-ch'iao, sold by her brother into marriage to the paralyzed son of an upper-class family, shares the fate of many Chinese women forced into an overtly dehumanizing practice. Trapped under the roof of decadence and corruption, Ch'i-ch'iao's sense of virtue deteriorates and, driven to madness, retaliates for her sad, pathetic life by cruelly victimizing her children.

Life is an exquisite gown riddled with lice - Eileen Chang

In *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction*, C. T. Hsia praises Eileen Chang as a literary genius, helping to steer newly critical appraisal of her work after decades of almost being forgotten. Chang enjoyed instant success with *Love in a Fallen City* and was popularly compared to Jane Austen for her probing psychological insights into society and love relationships. Why then did this stunning writer allow her star to fizzle; retreat into a self-imposed exile; die a veritable recluse? The romantic in me imagines some unfulfilled passion parallel to the tragic heroine Lin Daiyu of *The Dream of The Red Chamber*. I'm excited that this renewed interest in Chang's work means flooding the Western market with English translations, among them, hopefully soon, her biography.

Other pending reads from Eileen Chang :

Naked Earth

The Fall of the Pagoda

The Rice Sprout Song

The Rouge of the North

Written on Water
