



## Feathered Serpent

*Xu Xiaobin , ???*

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ONE OF THE FOREMOST WORKS OF TWENTIETH-CENTURY CHINESE LITERATUREThis beautifully portrayed epic family history spans one hundred years, from the 1890s during the later stages of the Qing Dynasty to the 1990s, traversing the experiences of five generations of women. Yu is the central character, whose life story is woven through the lives of her grandmother, mother, sisters, and niece. She loves her parents but at a tender age realizes they do not love her. After committing two unforgivable sins, she is sent away to live in the city but is soon abandoned. Yu's life becomes a quest for love; she is fragile but resilient, lonely but determined. Now, in the 1980s, Yu becomes caught up in the political storm and comes close to love but falls short. Her last chance at getting what she desires will ultimately come at a tragic cost.

A political satirist in the guise of a mystical writer, Xu Xiaobin masterfully creates an atmosphere where distinctions are blurred; memories of the past and present are intertwined; realities and illusions are fused without a clear trace; and events occur in unspecified places but tinted with fairylike imaginations.

Xu Xiaobin is a rare talent with a vast knowledge of history, religion, and culture, and occupies a unique place in modern Chinese literature. When "Feathered Serpent" won China's inaugural Creative Writing Award for women's literary fiction, it was described as "a breakthrough, a record-setting novel in China's women's literature" and "the best fiction at the end of the century in China."

## Feathered Serpent Details

Date : Published February 10th 2009 by Atria (first published 1998)

ISBN : 9781416583806

Author : Xu Xiaobin , ???

Format : Hardcover 320 pages

Genre : Fiction, Cultural, China, Historical, Historical Fiction

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## From Reader Review Feathered Serpent for online ebook

### Stephen Durrant says

This novel is ambitious in almost every way. It spans four generations of women and expands outward into the lives of a variety of others. The political background to the narrative extends from the Taiping Revolution in the 1860's up to the years just after Tiananmen. The narrative moves quite freely back and forth in time and also shifts from a third-person to a variety of first-person perspectives. Furthermore, realism blends together with dream sequences, mysticism and magic. Overarching all of this is a statement about the desperate lives of Chinese women in both traditional and modern China, a theme that won Xu Xiaobin a prize for feminist literature. The central character is Yushe, the "feathered serpent." As a child of six, she killed her younger brother, which earned her the hate of her mother and the scorn of many others. She is a tragic, possibly crazy, figure, who is finally lobotomized in the final pages of the novel (no "spoiler" necessary since this is clearly foreshadowed right as the novel begins). Once Yushe is lobotomized, she becomes happy and is accepted well by all, including her mother! Get the message? The best way for a thinking woman to be happy in China is to rush right out and get a lobotomy! Well, I'm not sure all of this works, but I must say that "Feathered Serpent" does contain some very powerful, well-written pages. Is it worth the time? That depends on how much time you have.

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### Baljit says

The tone was somber and the syntax dull, so I gave up after a few chapters. Maybe something was lost in translation.

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### Terri says

"Nearly all beautiful women have ill-fated lives. Our story is no different."

On the day that Yu's little brother is born, Yu's mother and grandmother, for the first time in their lives are united and in agreement. They have formed an alliance. They join together in their hatred toward six year old Yu. Yu's father is seldom home and so it is an easy thing to make him an accomplice in their treatment of Yu.

Yu loves her parents and wants only as a small girl to be loved in return and denied that; she builds a shell of resilience around herself.

Yu comes to live with Jinwu, an exotically beautiful woman. Yu loves the beautiful house. "Yu adored it. Compared to the place she had lived before, this was truly a paradise. Yu enclosed herself in this house from dawn until dusk, cherishing every moment of life therein. It became her protective coloration, her armor, her cocoon."

This beautifully written book takes place over a hundred years from the 1890's to the 1990's with many characters involved. The Chinese names, for me, were difficult to keep straight and so I relied upon writing them down with a little note about each person. And then I realized at the back of the book the author has kindly done this already. It is a huge help!

This book is so beautifully and tragically written. A little caution though, Xu Xiaoban is not your average writer; there is a lot of psychoanalysis in the book that seems odd to a westerner. Also, I would think two translators working together on this book would smooth out the translation but it is a bit clunky and obvious that it is translated.

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### **Nikki says**

not sure if this is a translation thing or not but I found after 100 pages I could not go on. I felt as if the book's various narrators were preaching rather than living. I was disappointed as I had been looking forward to reading this.

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### **Mandy Tanksley says**

Xu Xiaobin's first novel to be translated into English, "Feathered Serpent" spends much of it's nearly four hundred pages flipping back and forth between stories of the four generations of family and friends featured within. Many of the characters are only somewhat believable and realistic and not very likable. This in itself does not make this a bad read. There are other books out there (including some that I have enjoyed) that feature the flaws of this particular book. I'm not sure if it's the book or the translation that made this so hard to get into. By moving back and forth between different characters' stories, the book tends to lose it's focus. One section will be about a certain character and be in the third person then in the next section the book remains on the same character but changes to first person. Some of the characters are called by two different names (i.e. the main character is called both Yushe and Yu). This started out confusing, but became less so after I read further into the book. The story revolves around Yushe, her family, and "friends" as they grow old (but not really up). They struggle to communicate with each other and cannot find love or a suitable life for themselves. They try controlling each other by playing on each others feelings and emotions (or lack thereof). There are several dream-like scenes woven throughout the story that do nothing to help move it along. The writing is not always bad. There are passages in the book that are beautiful and poetic. It is these parts that help me to understand why Xu Xiaobin is praised for her work. Still, the book was hard to get through and I'm actually thankful the trip is over.

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### **Mircalla64 says**

#### **il serpente femmina**

veleni e sfortune di una famiglia cinese dall'epoca imperiale fino ai giorni nostri

il canovaccio è classico, la solita epopea cinese su più generazioni con le donne come protagoniste, ma la narrazione prende in esame più punti di vista e spicca tra tutto la perfidia di alcune delle donne protagoniste, molto sarà di certo dovuto alla visione culturale cinese che vuole le donne sottomesse alle suocere, ma qua si esagera un tantino...la madre che fa lobotomizzare la figlia ribelle ancora non l'avevo vista da nessuna parte, eh si che di film e libri cinesi ormai posso dire di aver letto e visto più di quanto sia umanamente possibile per un non cinese...

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### **Libby says**

It is an ambitious story, told through the eyes of several women, over a long period of time, who are connected to each other through often elusive and uncertain blood ties. It is about the balance of life, about revenge and repentance, and tragedy of being an individual in a society which exists as a coherent whole, and roots out any difference with thoughtless cruelty. It is about survival and defeat, politics and family. The Lu family, with Yu at its heart, reflects the turmoil of the times through their own struggles and passions.

The narrative jumps back and forth through time, characters, and most significantly, from first to third person narration. This does not take away from the impact of the book, but emphasizes its tragedy, and weaves its story together. This trick of narrative switches without indicating whose first person voice we are reading, is a way of telling a collective story, a story that threads its way through time and space and several points of view to tell itself completely.

The John Gibbon translation seems forced and too literal to be truly beautiful, and is not as good as such a complex narrative requires, but it serves well enough to convey the heart of the story.

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### **Hildegunn Hodne says**

The book is approx. 370 pages and has 26 "main characters"!! In addition, the author jumps from 1st to 3rd person, where 1st person isn't always the same main character. At times it is rather difficult to keep up. The literary genre also seems to vary, with some parts being poetic, some venturing into erotic novella form, some parts appearing as rather dry listing of historical facts. All of this could of course be caused by the translation, but the book does not come across as one coherent story. It's more like a collection of short stories more or less related to each other. Some parts flowed very well, others were quite a challenge to get through.

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### **Fanfan says**

I am so surprised to find one of my favorite books has such a bad translation that many foreigners can't appreciate its real beauty. I red it in Chinese, this is absolutely a gorgeous book! The structure of the novel, the construction of the figures, the words guide us to feel the art of writing of Xu Xiaobin. Perhaps because of all theses reasons, the translator, who just wasn't capable to translate the charms of this book, translated it in a very irresponsible way. The writer has said herself that this is the book that costed her most of the energy, and even of the blood. This is the first book review that I have written in Goodreads, because I can't support such a good book treated like this. ??????????????????????Que toutes les mauvaises traductions n'apparaissent jamais !

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### **KristenR says**

Two stars is really pushing it...may get downgraded to one star after letting it sit for a bit.

The format Just didn't work. Not only did it have multiple POV, there were multiple 3rd person POV AND multiple 1st person POV. Without a linear timeline to keep everything tied together I was often confused.

I may have been more forgiving if I actually enjoyed the story or cared about any of the characters. I did not. The only reason I finished the book was because I wanted to know why Yu had the lobotomy in the first chapter. I drudged through 340 pages before I found out - and by then I didn't care anymore.

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### **Laura K says**

Wonderful book. I am amazed at the way this book weaves together the past and present, dreams, symbols, fictional events and historical events of five generations of a very large family. When I lost tract of who was speaking or was confused about the possible meaning, I just relaxed and read for the pure joy of it. This is an interesting book for discussion because different people can have different interpretations. I enjoy books about China, and I enjoy multigenerational tales, so I was attracted to this book. I'm glad I read it.

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### **Justine says**

The story was so interesting yet the jumping back and forth between characters, adding story after story of other characters from one time to another ruined it. Near the end it felt dragged out and I found it hard to keep interested in this book. There were a few parts that I enjoyed but the faults of this book ruined it for me.

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### **Martina says**

In una Pechino che tuttavia non viene mai nominata, si intrecciano le storie di una famiglia cinese dall'epoca imperiale. Lo scorrere del romanzo non rispetta una cronologia lineare: proprio come l'insolito albero genealogico che ci aiuta ad orizzontarci all'inizio del libro, anche le storie raccontate paiono spostarsi indietro e in avanti e poi di lato, portando alla ribalta l'una o l'altra delle donne della famiglia, spesso cedendo loro la parola in prima persona. È un romanzo epico, del genere che di per sé ci pare il più adeguato per rappresentare una paese vasto come la Cina, una saga familiare un romanzo d'amore che pare quasi stilizzato, tale è la delicatezza e la ritrosia con cui si parla di sentimenti. È, infine, un romanzo sulla colpa e sull'espiazione - e forse non è un caso che la colpevole sembri in realtà più vittima che criminale.

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### **Champaign Public Library says**

This is a horrible novel. I can't tell if it is a bad translation or it was always horrid. The story jumps around too much and changes voice too many times to keep the action straight. The characters were also people I could not bring myself to care about.

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### **Jodie "Bookish" Cook says**

## Book Review

Title: Feathered Serpent

Author: Xu Xiaobin

Genre: Murder/Historical/Mystery/Family

Rating: \*\*\*\*

Review: A family epic—originally published in China in 1998—that winds its way across generations of Chinese history, not always coherently.

“What is the difference between past and present? In many ways, the present is simply a new version of ancient history.”

Thus in Xu Xiaobin’s *Feathered Serpent*, a family saga of five generations, the tales of the women of this family blend and bleed into each other, along with the different periods of China’s changing history. *Feathered Serpent* tells of relationships that are uneasy, that are uncomfortable. It is a story of family misery in a greatly evolving China – from the late 19th century under the Empress Dowager Cixi to life under Mao Zedong in Communist China – and the despairing struggles that Yushe and the five generations of her family go through. As Xu, who grew up during the Cultural Revolution, explains in her preface,

“Even though the Chinese people have the ability to forget, all of these things that have happened are deeply carved into the memory of the heroine of this book, and into the minds of countless people of the same generation.”

Xu’s heroine is Yushe, whose name means Feathered Serpent and who belongs to the fourth generation of her family. Yu, as she is known, grows up under the despotic rule of her grandmother, Xuanming, as well as her wretched, self-obsessed mother, Ruomu, who is suspicious and jealous of everyone around her. At the age of six, Yu, “the frailest but most resilient of branches,” kills her baby brother, and whatever chance she had to be loved by her family is killed along with him, thus beginning her lifelong quest for love and acceptance:

“Since childhood she had been longing for love – the love of her parents; later, the love of friends. Only love and friendship would be good medicine; nothing else could bring zest to her life.”

Transport Gabriel García Márquez’s Macondo across the Pacific, and you have some sense of the setting for Xiaobin’s allegorical, sometimes fantastical novel. It opens on a curious note, as young Yushe, sensible and sensitive, undergoes a lobotomy so that, her mother insists, she might “preserve the girl’s mental health and allow her to live out the rest of her life as a normal person.” Fortunately for the development of the novel, Yushe seems little worse for the wear, while her two sisters—two, naturally, being the requisite number of sisters in a fairy tale—have travails of different kinds. Xiaobin, a writer in her mid-50s who has published several books in the People’s Republic of China, sets Yushe’s adventures and misadventures against a broad canvas that begins at the end of the 19th century and the last years of the Qing Dynasty and that ends at the turn of the present century. As the tale moves across five generations, it is not always entirely clear where in time it is, and the Western reader may be challenged in keeping its 26 major characters and many more minor ones sorted out. (The *dramatis personae* at the end of the book is of some help.) Punctuating the text

are closely observed scenes, as when one character, shot down by police, notices a car driving away “like a soaring bird whose flapping wings stirred up the filth and dust as it flew off through the still night.” More typical, though, are rather surrealistic moments—Involving, in one instance, steamy sex without regard for the fine distinctions of gender but with inventive use of flowers—and aoristic, dreamlike episodes, the better, it appears, to disguise the author’s only partly subtle critique of the Chinese state at the time of the Tiananmen Square massacre.

Lyrical, sometimes difficult, and engaging—an allusive, sidelong view of Chinese history by a writer who has seen many of its darker moments. The reader is meant to sympathize with Yu and her painful journey through life but is hindered by the labyrinthine narrative, as *Feathered Serpent* is not laid out in a linear fashion but jumps back and forth and back and forth again in time, from character to character, from third to first-person point of view. There is even an awkward moment when the author points the reader to an earlier chapter, offering a numbered signpost to a character mentioned early on in the story. And when one character asked another: “Why are you confused? Are you getting old and losing your memory?” I could empathize, lost as I was among the changing narrative and different points of view. It was only after finishing the book that I realized the back pages had a table listing the different generations and characters of the family. Neither does the translation help much. While the language is clear enough, it lacks luster, and as a result, tends to bog this complex book down. In this world where “nearly all beautiful women live ill-fated lives,” Xu picks her way through Yushe’s family as it gradually disintegrates. *Feathered Serpent* is a bleak tale of tales, of unhappy women in an unhappy family, but it is ultimately let down by the flat language and confusing narrative.

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