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An exciting new novel set in the "Chop Suey Circuit" of San Francisco right before World War II, from the beloved bestselling author of Snowflower and the Secret Fan and Shanghai Girls.

In 1938, Ruby, Helen and Grace, three girls from very different backgrounds, find themselves competing at the same audition for showgirl roles at San Francisco's exclusive "Oriental" nightclub, the Forbidden City. Grace, an American-born Chinese girl has fled the Midwest and an abusive father. Helen is from a Chinese family who have deep roots in San Francisco's Chinatown. And, as both her friends know, Ruby is Japanese passing as Chinese. At times their differences are pronounced, but the girls grow to depend on one another in order to fulfill their individual dreams. Then, everything changes in a heartbeat with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Suddenly the government is sending innocent Japanese to internment camps under suspicion, and Ruby is one of them. But which of her friends betrayed her?

China Dolls Details

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From Reader Review China Dolls for online ebook

Amanda says

This novel was definitely a miss for me. I guess nothing will live up to Snow Flower and the Secret Fan. The premise of the novel was promising (hence why I requested it for Early Reviewers) and I love the historical time period...BUT...these girls seem to despise each other. The early chapters are filled with rude remarks to each other (and snarky thoughts about each other); and then, to help the plotline along, since they have to be friends, the girls just think/say, "Well, we have to stick together anyway, so it is what it is" <--paraphrase, obviously. Because these girls are so derogatory about each other, it made me unsympathetic to their plights and I did not care what happened to them.

Miri says

I tried to give this two stars, but the more I think about it, the worse it seems, and I just don't think it deserves the second star. I'm a devoted Lisa See fan, and the premise was so intriguing, so I don't do this lightly. But I really did not like this book.

When I read *Song of the Silk Road* by Mingmei Yip, I thought it was just terrible, terrible writing. Now I wonder if this is a deliberate style, because I've read Lisa See's other books and the writing was beautiful. But why would she choose to write like this? Because it *is* terrible writing, it really is. For a moment I thought it might be that she wasn't good at writing first-person narrators, but no, all her other books had those... Then I wondered if it was the time period, that she was going for some kind of historical feel—but *Shanghai Girls* takes place in the same setting, and it was beautifully written. True, some of it is a Chinese style, with the proverbs and hyphenated adjectives that I have to admit, I just hate. "Top-top stars," "no-no girls," "true-heart friend," and all that. But the narration is a different thing, and I don't understand why such a good writer would intentionally use such a painfully unsophisticated style.

> "Lee, Tom, sweet ones, let me give this to you straight," I declared. "Grace and I won't go to New York unless you hire Helen and Eddie too." The two men exchanged glances. Could we really be such prima donnas? YES!

> Around noon, Joe arrived, wanting to check on us. He looked just as unsettled as we felt: *This is bad, very, very bad.*

> Before Grace could answer, someone pounded on the door. Double fists! Terror shot through my body as my woman parts constricted, yanking in fear up to my heart.

> I'll say this for Charlie: he loved kids. He was patient with them too, as long as they kept quiet. Quiet? What a joke!

To put it mildly—ughhh.

Here's the other thing, besides the writing: I hated the main characters. Hated them, especially Helen.

They've all been through terrible experiences, things that make me feel for them, make me willing to forgive a lot—but even so, each of them went beyond what I could tolerate. When I wasn't cringing at the writing or seething with rage over the racism of the 40s, I was furious about whatever new despicable thing a character had just done (usually to one of the other protagonists). Why were those women friends for so many years?? Relationships can be convoluted things even in less extreme circumstances than our characters faced, so I don't doubt that such a friendship is possible. But I read nothing in that book that could justify their continued connection over the years, and with how horrifically they treated each other, I just couldn't care about any of them anymore.

I read most of *China Dolls* in less than 24 hours, but what drove me was the desire to have finished it, to know whether it stayed as bad as it seemed to be. It did. For how excited I was to read it, for how much I've loved Lisa See's other books, this experience was a major disappointment.

?Karen says

Pre- and post-Pearl Harbor in San Francisco, and three Oriental-American club dancers are experiencing racial prejudice along with personal success and failures. The prejudice felt very familiar to what Muslims and Mexicans in this country might be experiencing in America now or in the near future (if we allow a certain trumpeter who likes to blow his own horn into office). Prejudice will live throughout history and the future, but books like this can educate us as to its effects on its innocent victims and the unfairness of such thoughts.

Unfortunately, while the book's message and content were relevant, the narrator of the audiobook only managed to make the characters sound one dimensional and cold. Or is that how they were written? The three female leads had very diverse personalities and backgrounds, yet all came out in almost the exact same voice, which made it hard to follow. I did like reading about their performances on the Chop Suey circuit, Chinese traditions, and the internment of Japanese-Americans.

This may not be my favorite Lisa See book (that will always be Snow Flower and the Secret Fan), but I'm going to blame that on the narration, not on the writing. I have to give Lisa See the benefit of a doubt because she's always phenomenal. So 3 stars.

Jeanette says

Being a huge fan of Lisa See, all I can say is that I'm sorry I had to give this 2 stars. The dialog between the girls doesn't seem like actual conversation, it just didn't work for me. These characters did not come alive to me as real women. And how they related to each other? Maybe it would be possible for their shared career path? Hoping that each chapter might get me interested in these women's outcomes, I stopped and started this book several times. But I never got imbedded in any outcomes and they never connected to me. Or to each other much either, IMHO.

It could be the S.F. and Chinatown locale with dance as the prime aspect of work or this being in that time period of such open change possible for all USA women? Regardless, for me, the tension and depth were just missing in this story. Peony I knew by the end of that book. Snow Flower I felt her fear and sorrows. These women I just knew about the facades of their lives and mores of their work, and don't know the individuals at

all.

Rebecca Foster says

A sparkling wartime saga following three Asian-American girlfriends who meet in San Francisco's Chinatown in 1938. As they grow closer, sharing apartments and gigs, the cardinal virtue of loyalty often seems at odds with the exigencies of stardom.

See vividly depicts the bawdy atmosphere of the semi-nude nightclubs where the 'Chinese Fred Astaire' and 'Chinese Frank Sinatra' got their start. She peoples her Chinatown settings with a mixture of fictional and historical characters (Ronald Reagan and Errol Flynn make the briefest of cameo appearances), and gives intense visual descriptions of the girls' song-and-dance routines.

However, the strategy of dividing first-person narration three ways is less than successful; I wondered if a third-person omniscient perspective might have worked better, or if See should have chosen just one girl (probably Grace) as narrator. I also felt the novel was trying to cover too much historical ground and might have been improved by zooming in on a shorter time span.

(Non-subscribers can read an excerpt of my full review at BookBrowse.)

Coleen says

This is a story of three American "Oriental" girls (as they were called at the time) who meet by chance in San Francisco in the late 1930's while trying out as nightclub dancers on the outskirts of Chinatown. Each come from different backgrounds and the story centers around their friendship as it evolves and changes through the next ten years or so.

I honestly had trouble really liking this book. I found the writing somewhat mediocre and I really didn't care for any of the characters, even by the end of the novel. Calling their relationship a "friendship" seemed to be somewhat of a loose interpretation of the word, as the young women never seemed to have a close relationship and were tirelessly having petty arguments amongst themselves or constantly seemed to be in competition with one another for fame and popularity. However, despite my mixed feelings about the characterization, I did enjoy the setting of the book, and I feel like I was enlightened about the United States during World War II and the attitudes Americans had about the Japanese and thus the Japanese American people at the time.

I've enjoyed other books by Lisa See, but this one just didn't hit the mark for me.

Carol says

I am partial to historical fiction set in the 1940's that include WWII, and was *really* looking forward to reading this novel chosen by my local book-club, but it unfortunately fell short for me. The story does have an interesting and engaging start, but as I became more acquainted with the deceitful main protagonists, Grace, Irene, and Ruby, their *"so-called"* friendship just *did not* click; and despite the secrets not yet

revealed, I just did not especially care about these three self-absorbed dancers or the storyline that flatlined for me mid-way through.

That being said, I did enjoy the inclusion of historical events and the mention of notable people of the time, but overall, my first Lisa See novel turned out to be tiresome and just ok for me. 2.5 Stars with a round-up to 3.

Polly says

I'm a Lisa See fan. I preordered this book. I'm kind of disappointed in it. Something about it just wasn't up to her usual standard. I never really understood why these three girls were friends. The only basis for that friendship seemed to be that they were all pretty, and that's it! Is that what the author intended? The jumping back and forth between narrators was disjointed - it didn't flow smoothly at all. And the actions of the characters didn't match what they were thinking, and what they were thinking didn't match what they were saying. This was just a weird mish-mash.

All that said, the history of the time she's conveying is really really interesting. At the back of the book were some links to videos of the Chop Suey Circuit performers, plus references to other books that might put that time period into a truer perspective.

Estela says

I am, by all accounts, a fairly voracious reader. I love books of a variety of genres and writing styles. I do, of course, have preferences and pet peeves. One thing I do enjoy in fiction books is an ending that ties up loose ends. While I appreciate a reader desiring to create their own version of a character's future, I highly value when an author delivers me to the end of the journey I embarked on when I cracked open the cover. And with certain novels, I become so intimate with characters and so invested in their outcomes that an ambiguous ending results in a few curse words directed at the author and frustration that seems to permeate my day.
"China Dolls" hooked me with well-written characters, trials and tribulations they experienced that were wholly believable, and an ending that left me satisfied and breathing a sigh of relief. Lisa See's novel is the story of Helen, Ruby, and Grace, three young women living in San Francisco in 1938, who meet and become dancers at the Forbidden City, a nightclub near Chinatown. Though they come from very different backgrounds, the three become fast friends, navigating the world of prejudice of their Oriental backgrounds and their own dreams of the future while battling the rollercoaster of their pasts. Helen comes from a privileged and highly respected family living in Chinatown's largest compound. Grace hails from the Midwest and went to San Francisco seeking a new life away from her physically and emotionally abusive father. Ruby is a seductive vixen with no qualms about using her wiles to get ahead. Each of them, though, harbors secrets which lead to chasms within their friendships and tumultuous years ahead.
The novel is written in first person accounts by the three, each one narrating various different chapters throughout. It is easy to get wrapped up in their storylines, to cheer them on when they do good, to get frustrated when they are being naive, or to feel disdain when they do something offensive.
The story ends 50 years later, when the characters gather together for a 50th Anniversary show for the Forbidden City. It does a phenomenal job of resolving the fates of all the characters, tying up all the loose

ends in a neat bow, just the way I like.

Yani says

Me alegra haber empezado el año conociendo a autoras nuevas y fantásticas. Este libro lo devoré, no sólo por la escritura sencilla, sino también por la historia que no da respiro. Cuando compré *Muñecas chinas* pensé que me iba a encontrar con una novela esencialmente romántica que utilizaba la amistad entre tres mujeres como pretexto, pero no: *realmente* es una novela sobre ellas.

Los acontecimientos de la novela se desarrollan entre años conflictivos pero los más importantes son los que abarcan la Segunda Guerra Mundial. Tres jóvenes norteamericanas de ascendencia china llamadas Grace, Helen y Ruby se conocen en San Francisco y establecen una relación tan fuerte como ambigua. Intentarán posicionarse en el club Forbidden City como bailarinas mientras luchan contra las tradiciones y las tragedias personales que las atan. Y sí, también conocerán a algunos hombres. El hecho de ser mujer en esa cultura, la discriminación, la maternidad, el amor y la lealtad son algunos de los temas que se tocan.

A medida que avanza el libro una no entiende por qué estas chicas tan distintas entre sí son amigas. Pensaba que se cruzaron en el momento justo, pero cuando terminé *Muñecas chinas* entendí el mensaje. Afirmo que sí, que la amistad femenina puede ser así de complicada. Grace, Helen y Ruby comparten las mismas ambiciones (sobre todo Grace y Ruby, que son las artistas) y la solidaridad se transforma en egoísmo. Esto está presente durante toda la novela y se pone al límite con el estallido de la Segunda Guerra Mundial y el ataque a Pearl Harbor. Eso las afectará laboral y emocionalmente y se nota que es el punto de quiebre. Por otro lado (y esto es muy importante en el libro), la ambientación en los clubes nocturnos de Chinatown y el retrato de esos tiempos está muy bien transmitido. Vale aclarar que no son lugares ficticios. La autora hizo un trabajo de investigación que se detalla en el epílogo y comenta sus fuentes. Si googlean los nombres de los clubes, los van a encontrar. Ver las imágenes mientras leía me pareció una experiencia fenomenal: casi podía imaginar a las protagonistas arreglándose para salir a escena.

Los personajes me parecieron muy sólidos y coherentes. Cada uno tiene un carácter especial y están bien desarrollados, como Ruby, Helen y Eddie, y hay otros que se quedaron (para mi gusto) un poco rezagados, como Grace, el padre de Helen y Joe. Tanto los personajes femeninos como los masculinos tienen sus pros y sus contras, aunque lamentablemente no entendí por qué se les otorgó el perdón a un par de personajes que merecían desaparecer. Grace me había gustado en un principio pero luego toma un par de decisiones que no me convencieron, pero creo que se debió a su carácter ingenuo. Helen es la chica con una familia tradicional que la trata de inútil (por ser mujer y por algo que no revelaré) y Ruby es la joven alegre y sin prejuicios.

Con respecto a cuestiones formales, la novela está narrada en primera persona y tiene tres voces, una para cada protagonista. Cada capítulo señala quién está contando la historia, por más que en un momento se vuelva innecesario. Las voces están bien trabajadas y se nota quién es quién. Helen es la más seria y llena todo con refranes, Grace es tranquila y melancólica y Ruby, bueno… Es una explosión de expresiones competitivas y egocéntricas. Lo único que no me gustó de *Muñecas chinas* es el estilo: es demasiado simple y se queda corto en los hechos relevantes (sacando la parte de los clubes), tanto en las descripciones como en los diálogos. Sentí que le faltaba fuerza para envolverme, sin importar cuál fuera la narradora de turno. Las escenas se suceden una detrás de otra como una película y varias veces le perdí el hilo. De todas formas, no me parece que See sea una mala escritora. Sólo opino que en este libro, el primero que leo de ella, faltó un despliegue más grande de su capacidad para meterme en los puntos dramáticos de la novela. Confío en que puede hacerlo porque en el final me arrancó una lágrima.

Me veo leyendo más de Lisa See en un futuro y seguro *El abanico de seda* será el próximo. No puedo descartar así como así a una escritora que se toma la molestia de darles vida a personajes femeninos que tienen muchos más objetivos que "encontrar el amor" (quien tenga ese único objetivo, espero que lo consiga, de corazón), condimentando la historia con una amistad donde abundan los celos y escasean las muestras de cariño sinceras. Recomendaría la novela a quienes gusten de la ficción histórica y se hayan hartado de los personajes habituales.

Carol says

The Hook - I'm a fan of Lisa See. After reading many high fives for China Dolls I decided I was in. When I needed a new audiobook China Dolls won the toss.

The Line – *"The fear of death is a powerful aphrodisiac."*

The Sinker – I've waited a few days to comment onChina Dolls. I wanted to give myself time to think what went wrong for me in this book. I expected to be wowed but came away feeling conflicted. There were many things I liked, each woman's story and their struggle and determination to be reach the top, the pre-World War II setting in San Francisco's China Town, the examination of race and culture as it pertains to the Chinese and Japanese in a world on the brink of war, and its nod to real life events of that period, including the real Forbidden City and Charlie Low. I liked the descriptions of their clothing, hairstyles, dance routines, and mores of the day. So why conflicted? Something was just off. Like others who gave this less than good marks, the characters and dialog seemed stilted to me. Perhaps some of my disconnect came from the listen rather than the printed page. I had trouble with the narrator, Jodi Long. When she kept to her own voice, all was fine, but her change in vocalization for each of the characters, Grace, Helen and Ruby, just didn't work for me. Interestingly, Jodi Long narration of China Dolls is an Audiofile Magazine Earphones Award Winner, an award given for *"Earphones to truly exceptional presentations that excel in all the following criteria:*
Narrative voice and style
Vocal characterizations
Appropriateness for the audio format
Enhancement of the text

I enjoyed the historical aspects enough to want to read Forbidden City, USA: Chinese American Nightclubs, 1936-1970. I have already watched Arthur Dong presents "Forbidden City, U.S.A." at the San Francisco Public Library
. I also plan to listen to this These Nightclub Entertainers Paved The Way For Asian-Americans In Showbiz my link text from NPR.

Carol says

I was very surprised Lisa See came out with this book. It is flat, plodding, and dull. I don't actually understand the story arc or ultimate point of the novel. I am a huge fan of "Snow Flower and the Secret Fan" which is beautifully written, lush, and fascinating, but "China Dolls" is not a well put-together work – hard to believe it was written by the same author!

I found this book to be shallow reading based for pre-teens. The girls were shallow, giggly, and immature.

Isabel Allende says

As World War II begins, three friends find themselves competing for one showgirl role at San Francisco Chinatown's exclusive nightclub The Forbidden City. Ruby is Japanese and desperate to pass as Chinese so she won't be sent to a Japanese internment camp, Grace has fled her abusive Mid-western family, and Helen, who grew up in Chinatown, hides her own secret. The author of Snow Flower and the Secret Fan beautifully explores the intricacies of friendship.

Connie says

Oh. My. Great. Goodness....and breathe....

Lisa See has really outdone herself with this one. I'm not at sure if she shouldn't just put up her pen and call it a day.....this book was just so wonderful! I seriously wonder how she can ever top it....Most people if asked what this book was about would automatic reply with it's about some Chinese and Japanese girls in San Francisco at the time leading up to, during and after WWII....But it's not. To me, that's the whole point. This is a story about 3 Americans from Chinese and Japanese descent. These ladies are every bit as American as any one else born and raised in the USA. Although your ancestry might help shape you, it does not define you. This is also the story of how people are judged and sometimes defined by their looks. This is the story of a great friendship. One that is true to life....but only if we are lucky. Yes, perhaps there will be parts that make you mad and wonder how anyone could call someone like that a friend, but this book broke my heart. It made me....no....it DEMANDED that I set my judgements aside....to leave them at the door and try to view the situation from someone else's eyes. It made me seriously try to put myself in that time period. To imagine what it was like around me. The paranoia. The resentment. The sense of survival. Trying to maintain trust whilst everyone around you is pointing fingers. It reminds me that for some, trying to make peace with what you know, what is expected of you, what you want, and your own past...well, sometimes these things will never be reconciled. Sometimes the battles we fight in silence, within ourselves....well they are the bravest....and often the ones that are never celebrated.

When will any of us be judged solely on their own merits? By only their own actions? I know that's a Pollyanna view and an unrealistic desire....but why? Why must we judge on the colour of skin? On our family? On our ancestors? On our Country? On all of the very things that we are powerless to change? Yet, the things within our power....those are the last things to come to be judged by.....

Yes, I won't say that parts of this book didn't just break my heart. That it didn't depress me. It did. However, these characters were so rich to me. I fell in love with so many of them. I understood so many of them. I admired so many of them. I could sympathize with so many of them....even the ones I was angry with. By the way Lisa See presented them to me, well, even though I knew they were unyielding in their actions, even though I was angry and upset by this....I understood why they were that way....even if I didn't agree or like it. However, the main characters of this book....wow...just wow....I can't imagine going through what any one of them endured. Let alone coming out like they did. The courage they displayed. At their tenaciousness. How easy would it have been for any one of them to just throw in the towel and to despair at life. How easy it would be to just look at the actions of others and to toss them aside and never give them another

thought....instead of looking at only actions, each one found it within themselves to try to understand the reason for the actions...Some would argue that this makes them too soft hearted and gullible. I disagree. It is, in fact, much harder to set aside our own feelings and try to understand another's.....

We should all be so lucky to have people around us like this....

No one ever does something without a reason.....nothing ever happens just "out of the blue". Our past does define our future.....This doesn't forgive anyone of any wrong doing.....but if we are to be judged by circumstances that are completely out of our control, shouldn't we at least be forgiven for those within our control that we try to set right?

Read this book. Please. But leave your preconceived ideas of "china dolls" at the door. For me, this was not a novel about some night club dancers. That couldn't be further from the truth....

I realise that my review might not convey how much I loved this book....

Let me set the record straight....right here....right now....

I LOVED LOVED LOVED this book.....I already miss Grace, Ruby, Helen and Eddie.....because they are no longer in my current read, I will gladly just keep them in my heart and hope they continue to encourage me to look deeper....

www.randombookmuses.com

Laura says

I enjoyed this book and then I didn't...It also took me along time to actually get through the book so it felt quite disjointed but that's entirely my own fault. I was uming and ahing if I should give this a 2 or a 3 start since you can't give halves otherwise it'd be a clear 2.5 but I decided to give it the 3 because the book hooked me straight away.

Overall the book is enjoyable, it reads well but there is just something about the characters that don't sit quite well for me. I guess these girls were kind of thrown in together and therefore a friendship was born but honestly, it doesn't seem like the kind of natural friendship that would be kept up which it was in this book. So maybe I felt their 3 friendships were a touch 'fake/forced'. Maybe if the friendship had of been between two characters rather than three it might of also gone over better...Yes, three is a crowd rings true for so many reasons.

This is my first book by Lisa See, she'd been on my list of authors to read for sometime..It seems like her other books got a better wrap than this one.

It was one of those books that jumps betweens narrators (the three girls - Grace, Helen and Ruby) and a few times I found myself getting confused as to who's point of view I was reading from..I think this is because I didn't feel the characters 'felt' all that different from each other besides their "dark secrets".

I did enjoy the history behind the book though, getting a glimps into a time now long lost into the history

books. You can tell there seemed to be a great deal of research gone into this part of the storytelling/world building.

What kinda wrecked it for me overall was the ending...It just seemed wrong after everything that had happened. Yes, I understand people can go through a lot of crap in their lifespan but something about what happened to these woman would make me think that the friendship wouldn't of held up.

Lyn (Readinghearts) says

Like many readers, my introduction to author Lisa See's work was with Snow Flower and the Secret Fan, and like most readers, I instantly fell in love. The book was beautifully written, the story was wonderful. Since reading Snow Flower, I have read most of the rest of Lisa See's work, and own copies of them all. To say that I am a fan of her work just doesn't quite say it all.

I recently read her new offering, China Dolls, and I am glad to say that I was not disappointed. China Dolls tells the story of the rise of Asian entertainers on the nightclub circuit during the late 1930s through the mid 1940s, through the lives of Grace, Helen, and Ruby, three separate women who were Asian entertainers during that time. It is in the way that the lives of these three women alternately intersect and diverge that the story of what it was like to be an entertainer on the "Chop Suey Circuit" was like.

One of the things that I have always loved about Lisa See's books is the way she uses her characters as the main story-telling agent in her books. In China Dolls, each of the three main characters represent an amalgamation of people that lived in that time in history. Grace is a Chinese born American whose parents moved to the Midwest to raise their daughter as far from other Chinese as possible. Helen is also an American born Chinese, but her parents are living the traditional Chinese lifestyle in a secluded compound in San Francisco's Chinatown. Ruby, on the other hand, is the girl who wants to be totally American in every way, using American slang and dressing American whenever she can, but who is hiding more of a secret that just her wish to be American and not Asian. I have to say, I am continually amazed at how Lisa See is able to come up with such vibrant, realistic characters that effectively represent a section of Asian culture and history time and time again. Her characters are so well crafted that they become very real to me, and stay with me long after I have read the book.

Another strong point of the book, and Lisa See's writing in general, is her excellent knowledge of the history and culture of the subject that she is writing about. Her research into the subject is always spot on. In the case of China Dolls, the main nightclub in San Francisco, The Forbidden City, really existed, showcasing first Chinese entertainers, and later Asian entertainers of all kinds well into the 1950s. Many of the characters in the book were actual owners or entertainers at the nightclub, although in many cases she has changed their names. Other characters are an amalgamation of several entertainers from that time. In addition, the lives of the women outside the nightclub are spot on and truly represent what it was like to live at that time.

The only thing that felt a bit off in this book, though, was the intense level of competition between the women. Over time, I have become used to the deep and intense friendships between the characters in Lisa See's books. The kind of friendships that, even during fights or disagreements, never really waver. In this light, I was not really prepared for the amount of discord between the three main characters of this story. At times it seemed that Grace, Helen, and Ruby were always trying to one-up each other, or in some cases, actually turn each other against the others. As characters, they were much more manipulative and shallow than what I am used to in Lisa See's characters, and each one was a diva in her own way. In retrospect,

though, I feel that their behavior is justifiable to the story and culture that they represent. After all, the entertainment business has always been a bit dog eat dog, and being in a section of it where the jobs were fewer and competition was higher would only highlight that type of behavior.

Although this was not my favorite Lisa See book (that would be Shanghai Girls), that fact that I am giving a 4.5 rating to a book that is not my favorite speaks volumes. Lisa See has yet to disappoint me, and China Dolls is no exception to that rule. In fact, I stayed up one night until 4am to finish it, and then was disappointed because it was over and I read it so fast. I highly recommend this book for fans of Lisa See and fans of Chinese American culture. You will not be sorry.

Additional Note: I was excited to find that The Forbidden City nightclub, which played a central part in this story, was actually the inspiration of the musical Flower Drum Song, which is my favorite musical of all time.

Thanks to Random House publishers and Edelweiss for making a copy of this book available in exchange for my review.

Aditi says

"Each friend represents a world in us, a world possibly not born until they arrive, and it is only by this meeting that a new world is born."

----Anaïs Nin, *a French-born novelist, passionate eroticist and short story writer*

Lisa See, a Chinese-American *NY Times Bestselling* author, crafts an unique and heart-touching story, called *China Dolls*, about friendship beyond religion, country, war, love and hate between two Chinese girls and one Japanese girl trying to earn a living in their hometown America when the whole world is raging with war.

Synopsis:

It's 1938 in San Francisco: a world's fair is preparing to open on Treasure Island, a war is brewing overseas, and the city is alive with possibilities. Grace, Helen, and Ruby, three young women from very different backgrounds, meet by chance at the exclusive and glamorous Forbidden City nightclub. Grace Lee, an American-born Chinese girl, has fled the Midwest with nothing but heartache, talent, and a pair of dancing shoes. Helen Fong lives with her extended family in Chinatown, where her traditional parents insist that she guard her reputation like a piece of jade. The stunning Ruby Tom challenges the boundaries of convention at every turn with her defiant attitude and no-holds-barred ambition.

The girls become fast friends, relying on one another through unexpected challenges and shifting fortunes. When their dark secrets are exposed and the invisible thread of fate binds them even tighter, they find the strength and resilience to reach for their dreams. But after the Japanese attack Pearl Harbor, paranoia and suspicion threaten to destroy their lives, and a shocking act of betrayal changes everything.

This is not any ordinary story about friendship and love, instead it's a story that traces friendship across caste and race even though the friendship is layered with hate, revenge and greed. Grace, Helen and Ruby- three Chinese girls, among whom one lied about her identity since it was the period when America was at war with Japan. So revealing your real identity as a Japanses would have turned fatal for your existence even though you were born in the United States. And all three belong from a torn up past and homes. Grace- survived from the abuses of her father in Ohio by running away to San Fransisco and earning a living by becoming a dancer. Unfortunately her attempts of being a dancer proved futile when people rejected her because of her Oriental face, which finally leads her to The Forbidden City, where she meets Helen. Together they audition for a show in a club where they meet another Oriental girl, Ruby. Soon they become friends, and eventually becomes soul sisters, until Ruby's promiscuity forces Grace to leave town thus weakening the bond of friendship. More challenges like attack on Pearl Harbor to stealing one's role in a feature film to harboring secrets to betrayal forces them to move apart from one another and threatens to destroy their lives.

After reading this book, all I can say that Lisa See is an incredible author, and since I always love to read books about Chinese culture and history, I loved reading this book which captivated my mind with it's Chinese grace from the very first page. Being of Chinese origin, See crafted this novel about Chinese culture and family structure with ease and vividness. Moreover, the three characters belong from three different backgrounds, one is American born Chinese and never followed her original culture, one is completely Chinese, and the other act as a Chinese yet born in America.

The writing is fantastic layered with that authentic oriental tone thus creating a likely atmosphere for the readers. The prose is articulate and flawless, thus keeping us engaged to the core of the story. What really kept me on the edge was Grace, Helen and Ruby's friendship of how their quick friendship turning into something promising and something even stronger than blood to how it was dissipating and fading into nothingness. Maybe that's what prove that friendship between two or more opposite souls is something very strange since it contains hatred, secret desires, competition, revenge and love, sisterly/brotherly connection, care at the same time.

The timeline that the author drew in their plot is evocative and striking enough to take us back in time in the year 1938- the period when Japan attacked America. Moreover, back in those days, Chinese women didn't have much choices to walk on their own shoes rather than being an obedient daughter/wife. The author also sheds light on the backdrops of this oriental culture, of how women were demeaned in their every decisions. Not only that the author captured the 40s night club era when too much flair, frill, loud music and lights were so into the time. The glamor in and outside the Chinese bars, restaurants and clubs in America was distinctly portrayed.

The narrative is really since since each chapter is a first person account of each primary characters- Grace, Ruby and Helen. Moreover, the conversation between the girls is free-flowing. Although it's a personal person narrative plot, the author leaves us enough space to look at the story through our own eyes, thus provoking our thoughts. The characters reflect the grace, charm and the pain of their time period very distinctly and the author molded each character very precisely from one another with enough depth, pain, emotions and flaws. And each chapter revealed a bit more about their past and demeanor. The emotions are strongly depicted thus making us break our heart every time Ruby or Grace or Helen fought with each other. I simply fell in love with their friendship instead of falling in love with the characters. Overall, the book is engrossing and enthralling which tells us a story of friendship layered in between the timeline of world war and culture in-differences.

Verdict: *Since the main theme of the book is friendship, this book will not only appeal to the historical fiction fans but will also appeal to the general readers. This book is a must-read!*

Courtesy: *Many, many thanks to the author Lisa See, for providing me with a copy of her book, in return for an honest review.*

Elyse says

Forgive me ... I'm cuckoo...
On vacation ... just came out of a massage..

THIS was the AUDIO book I listened to and liked... with the 3 girls in SF. ...
NOT that other book I never heard of. (forget it's name already)

My phone is doing tricks here in a cove - side mountain in Carmel. - starting- freezing - and running out of juice!

The VOICES in THIS book are really engaging - great company storytelling while taking a walk.

Each girl had their own issues - secrets - struggles - and gifts.
When 3 women have a very close friendship - it's a wonderful - but different dynamic than a close friendship with 1 other.

Ask any female who has experience a LONG TERM - close bond with 2 very close best friends. ..
My favorite parts were in S F..

Why? Well, the SF Bay Area is home to me...
Los Angeles is THE OTHER California.

Juice is running out..,
Luv my friends here TODAY..,anyway.. lol

HAPPY THANKSGIVING!!!!
(I couldn't stay away - even while on vacation - because when you are happy -- you want to share with people you care about)

This book had many great 'relationship' qualities ..
So .., do ALL OF US on Goodreads!

Cheers. 3% juice..... going now

Rachel says

if it weren't for the author's name staring at me in the upper left corner of every page, you would never have been able to convince me that this is the same author who wrote Snow Flower and the Secret Fan or Shanghai Girls. despite having been a fan of Lisa See for years, I could not have been more disappointed in this book.

first, the writing style was uninspired at best and juvenile at worst. you'd think that the concept of 'show, don't tell' was a foreign one to the author, except I thought her prose was beautiful in every other one of her novels that I've read. I genuinely don't understand what happened here. the story was told by three first-person narrators, none of whom seemed to have individual voices. It was commonplace for me while reading this book to have to flip back to the beginning of the chapter to remind myself whose section I was currently reading. it was all a giant blur, held together by shoddy prose.

in regards to the story itself, China Dolls again proved to be a massive disappointment. I never for one second believed the friendship between the three main characters, all of whom were so caught up in their own affairs and ambitions that they seemed to genuinely have no concern for or understanding of the two other girls who were supposed to be their best friends. they were three of the most unlikable characters I've ever encountered - even my early pick for a favorite, Grace, started to fail me about halfway through - and by the end I was just relieved to be rid of these characters and their petty drama. (it's impressive that a story set against the backdrop of World War II managed to come across as so vapid. while some of the characters suffered real horrors, these weren't granted the depth they deserved by the narrative.)

ultimately, I don't understand the point of this book. in a sentence: it was about three girls who latched onto one another for reasons never fully explored, despite seeming to actively dislike each other more often than not. sorry for the critical review, but I really expected more from Lisa See. I don't mean that I wanted her to tell a different story, exactly - I just expected higher quality prose, more three-dimensional characters, and at least a semblance of emotional resonance.

Nethra Ram says

Perhaps I took too long to finish reading this book; perhaps the intervals led to me getting bored over the story, I don't know. I'll give the author the benefit of the doubt, seeing how many others have been captivated by this story.

The book traces the life of three female Chinese dancers (and a plethora of other characters) through their time together performing at night clubs, being friends, turning enemies and trying to figure it all out. For such a sparkling premise, I expected a moving tale, or an emotionally wrought tale. I expected to feel sad, lost, poor, angry and furious in tow with each of the leading ladies. But I felt only a diluted version of these emotions, the narration starting lightly, and disappointing with not building up into a powerful force as the book picks up.

I felt all three characters sounded the same, with similar thought processes, contemplations and a readiness to accept anything thrown at them, reacting briefly and going back to being all lovey dovey. With the amount of crap each character has gone through, (they have stunning backstories that bring them to the point where the book begins), they seem to have no depth, taking them at face value for the reactions they portray. There

are just too many incidents that come across as convenient and hence unconvincing.

I feel this book would've worked better if it had been a second or third person narrative instead of first. Most of the time I was confused over who was speaking. That and tighter writing would've made this a stellar novel. For now though, it did not quite satisfy my appetite...

P.S: I absolutely love the cover! :)