



Ramapo Catskill Library System Book Discussion Leader's Guide

Snow Flower and the Secret Fan

by Lisa See (Random House, 2005)

Target Audience: For women readers interested in the cultures of other women from different times and places.

Synopsis: Lily is haunted by memories of who she once was, and of a person, long gone, who defined her existence. She has nothing but time now, as she recounts the tale of Snow Flower, and asks the gods for forgiveness.

Author Biography: Born February 18, 1955 in Paris, Lisa See grew up in the Chinatown section of Los Angeles. Although she is only 1/8 Chinese, her upbringing provided her with a powerful connection to that fraction of herself. "I really grew up in this very traditional, old Chinese family," she revealed in an interview with Barnes & Noble.com. "It was very traditional, but also quite magical in a lot of ways, because I really was in a very different culture than how I looked."

See's Chinese background was not the only aspect of her family that affected the course her life has taken. She also comes from a long line of writers and novelists. Her somewhat morose relatives initially led her to believe that writing must be the result of suffering and pain, which turned her off from literary pursuits at first. Ironically, despite her strong family roots, See only decided to try her hand at writing as a means of embarking on a lifestyle without roots.

Lisa See began work on her first book *On Gold Mountain: The One-Hundred-Year Odyssey of My Chinese-American Family*. This highly detailed family history charted the events that led her great-grandfather Fong See to become the godfather of her Chinatown neighborhood and the 100-year-old patriarch of her family. See interviewed close to 100 of her relatives while researching the book that both gave her a clearer portrait of how her racially mixed family developed and broke her into the publishing business.

See then went on to explore other aspects of both Chinese and American culture via fiction. She followed her debut with a series of popular political thrillers set in China and featuring American attorney David Stark. Her novel *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* abandons Stark and his pursuit of justice for the time being with a tale that reaches much further back into Chinese culture, and more specifically, the subordinate role women have traditionally played in that culture. And See's *Peony in Love* (2007) is a jarring historical novel set against the backdrop of an early-17th-century Chinese opera

See's position in the Chinese-American community has also extended beyond her writing. She was honored by the Organization of Chinese American Women as National Woman of the Year in 2001 and is also responsible for designing a walking tour of her Chinatown home in L.A. Her devotion to that apparently-small, but actually-vast, 1/8 of her ethnicity proves that well-worn adage about never judging a book by looking at its cover.

Reviews:

The Washington Post

The wonder of this book is that it takes readers to a place at once foreign and familiar – foreign because of its time and setting, yet familiar because this landscape of love and sorrow is inhabited by us all. *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* is a triumph on every level, a beautiful, heartbreaking story.

The New York Times

“Snow Flower and the Secret Fan is written with a stately but unremarkable prettiness; it is not a book that will make its mark for reasons of style. But Ms. See has worked enough joy, pain and dramatic weepiness (“Oh, how I wanted to dip a cloth into that water and wipe away the cares that played across my laotong’s features”) to give it a quiet staying power. It’s liable to be read by women’s groups and valued for its quaintness. (“All people cherish the hair on their moles, but Uncle Lu’s were splendid.”) But what will work best for this book is its own secret message: cultures vary, but old sames and same-olds don’t change.”

Publishers Weekly

“See’s engrossing novel set in remote 19th-century China details the deeply affecting story of lifelong, intimate friends (laotong, or “old sames”) Lily and Snow Flower, their imprisonment by rigid codes of conduct for women and their betrayal by pride and love. While granting immediacy to Lily’s voice, See (Flower Net) adroitly transmits historical background in graceful prose. Her in-depth research into women’s ceremonies and duties in China’s rural interior brings fascinating revelations about arranged marriages, women’s inferior status in both their natal and married homes, and the Confucian proverbs and myriad superstitions that informed daily life. Beginning with a detailed and heartbreaking description of Lily and her sisters’ foot binding (“Only through pain will you have beauty. Only through suffering will you have peace”), the story widens to a vivid portrait of family and village life. Most impressive is See’s incorporation of nu shu, a secret written phonetic code among women – here between Lily and Snow Flower – that dates back 1,000 years in the southwestern Hunan province (“My writing is soaked with the tears of my heart./An invisible rebellion that no man can see”). As both a suspenseful and poignant story and an absorbing historical chronicle, this novel has bestseller potential and should become a reading group favorite as well.”

Library Journal

“Foot binding; nu shu, a secret language used exclusively by the women of Hunan Province for 1000 years; and laotong, the arranged friendship between little girls meant to

last a lifetime, provide the framework for See's (Dragon Bones) riveting look at a little-known chapter in 19th-century Chinese history. In 1903, 80-year-old Lily looks back on her life, which was anchored by her laotong relationship with the beautiful Snow Flower. As little girls, the two communicated in nu shu, writing of their mutual devotion on a fan they passed between each other over the years. Raised according to the traditional restrictions of the times, they lived most of their lives confined to the upstairs women's chamber in their homes, enduring the relentless societal insistence that women are worthless except for their value in producing sons. The laotong bonds of Lily and Snow Flower endure through family tragedies, a typhoid-fever epidemic, and the Taiping Rebellion of 1851-64, but it is a misunderstood message in nu shu, the language that held them together for decades, that ultimately tears them apart. See's meticulous research and exquisite language deliver a story that is haunting, powerful, and, at times, almost too painful to bear. Highly recommended. "

School Library Journal

"Adult/High School. Lily at 80 reflects on her life, beginning with her "daughter days" in 19th-century rural China. Foot-binding was practiced by all but the poorest families, and the graphic descriptions of it are not for the fainthearted. Yet women had nu shu, their own secret language. At the instigation of a matchmaker, Lily and Snow Flower, a girl from a larger town and supposedly from a well-connected, wealthy family, become laotong, bound together for life. Even after Lily learns that Snow Flower is not from a better family, even when Lily marries above her and Snow Flower beneath her, they remain close, exchanging nu shu written on a fan. When war comes, Lily is separated from her husband and children. She survives the winter helped by Snow Flower's husband, a lowly butcher, until she is reunited with her family. As the years pass, the women's relationship changes; Lily grows more powerful in her community, bitter, and harder, until at last she breaks her bond with Snow Flower. They are not reunited until Lily tries to make the dying Snow Flower's last days comfortable. Their friendship, and this tale, illustrates the most profound of human emotions: love and hate, self-absorption and devotion, pride and humility, to name just a few. Even though the women's culture and upbringing may be vastly different from readers' own, the life lessons are much the same, and they will be remembered long after the details of this fascinating story are forgotten. – Molly Connally, Chantilly Regional Library, VA "

Kirkus Reviews

"A nuanced exploration of women's friendship and women's writing in a remote corner of Imperial China. At the end of her life, Lady Lily Lu, the 80-year-old matriarch of Tongkou village, sits down to write her final memoir – one that will be burned at her death. Using nu shu, a secret script designed and kept by women, Lily spends her final years recounting her training as a woman, her longing for love and the central friendship of her life. Born, in 1823, into an ordinary farming family, Lily might not have ended up as a wealthy matriarch. Her earliest memories are of running through the fields outside with her cousin Beautiful Moon in the last days before her foot-binding. But in childhood, Lily's middle-class fate changed dramatically when the local diviner suggested that her well-formed feet made her eligible for a high-status marriage and for a

special ceremonial friendship with a laotong (sworn bosom friend). Accordingly, Lily became laotong with Snow Flower, a charming girl from an upper-class household. Together, the two begin a friendship and intimate *nu shu* correspondence that develops with them through years of house training, marriages, childbirths and changes in social status. See is fascinated by imagining how women with constrained existences might have found solace-and poetry – within the unexpected, little known writing form that is *nu shu*. Occasionally, in the midst of notes about childbirth and marriages, Lily and Snow Flower wonder how to understand the value of their secret writing in relation to the men’s “outside world.” The question is left delicately open. As the Taiping Rebellion (1851-64) approaches the villages around them, threatening to disrupt the social order, Lily and Snow Flower’s private intimacy changes, stretches and is strained. Taut and vibrant, the story offers a delicately painted view of a sequestered world and provides a richly textured account of how women might understand their own lives. A keenly imagined journey into the women’s quarters.”

Questions for Discussion:

1. In your opinion, is Lily, who is the narrator, the heroine or the villain? What are her flaws and her strengths?
2. Do you think the concept of “old sames” exists today? Do you have an “old same,” or are you part of a sworn sisterhood? In what ways are those relationships similar or different from the ones in nineteenth-century China?
3. Some men in 19th-century China apparently knew about *nu shu*, the secret women’s writing described in Snow Flower. Why do you think they tolerated such private communication?
4. Lily writes her story so that Snow Flower can read it in the afterworld. Do you think she tells her story in a convincing way so that Snow Flower can forgive and understand? Do you think Snow Flower would have told the story differently?

5. When Lily and Snow Flower are girls, they have one intimate – almost erotic – moment together. Do you think their relationship was sexual or, given the times, were they simply girls who saw this only as an innocent extension of their friendship?
6. Having a wife with bound feet was a status symbol for men, and, consequently, having bound feet increased a woman's chances of marriage into a wealthier household. Women took great pride in their feet, which were considered not only beautiful but also their best and most important feature. As a child, would you have fought against having your feet bound, as Third Sister did, knowing you would be consigned to the life of a servant or a "little daughter-in-law"? As a mother, would you have chosen to bind your daughter's feet?
7. The Chinese character for "mother love" consists of two parts: one meaning "pain," the other meaning "love." In your own experience, from the perspective of a mother or a daughter, is there an element of truth to this description of mother love?
8. In the story, we are told again and again that women are weak and worthless. But were they really? In what ways did Lily and Snow Flower show their strength and value?
9. Although the story takes place in the nineteenth century and seems very far removed from our lives – we don't have our feet bound, we're free and mobile – do you think we're still bound up in other ways; for instance, by career, family obligations, conventions of feminine beauty, or events beyond our control such as war, the economy, and natural disasters?
10. Because of its phonetic nature, *nu shu* could easily be taken out of context and be misunderstood. Today, many of us communicate through e-mail or instant-messaging. Have you ever had an experience where one of your messages has been misunderstood because of lack of context, facial or body gestures, and tone of voice? Or have you ever been on the receiving end of a message that you misinterpreted and your feelings were hurt?

**Compiled by Lisa Hewel, Goshen Public Library - August 2008
Ramapo Catskill Library System Adult Services Advisory Council**