Snow Flower and the Secret Fan

by Lisa See

About the Book

In nineteenth-century China, in a remote Hunan county, a girl named Lily, at the tender age of seven, is paired with a laotong, “old same,” in an emotional match that will last a lifetime. The laotong, Snow Flower, introduces herself by sending Lily a silk fan on which she’s painted a poem in nu shu, a unique language that Chinese women created in order to communicate in secret, away from the influence of men. As the years pass, Lily and Snow Flower send messages on fans, compose stories on handkerchiefs, reaching out of isolation to share their hopes, dreams, and accomplishments. Together, they endure the agony of foot-binding, and reflect upon their arranged marriages, shared loneliness, and the joys and tragedies of motherhood. The two find solace, developing a bond that keeps their spirits alive. But when a misunderstanding arises, their deep friendship suddenly threatens to tear apart.

Discussion Guide

1. 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 nineteenth-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. The author sees **Snow Flower and the Secret Fan** as a novel about love and regret, but do you think there's also an element of atonement in it as well

9. 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?

10. 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?

11. Because of its phonetic nature, *nu shu* could easily be taken out of context and be misunderstood. Today, many of us communicate though 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?

12. Madame Wang, the matchmaker, is a foot-bound woman and yet she does business with men. How is she different from the other women in the story? Do you think she is considered a woman of status or is she merely a necessary evil?

Author Bio

Lisa See is the *New York Times* bestselling author of PEONY IN LOVE, SNOW FLOWER AND THE SECRET FAN, FLOWER NET (an Edgar Award nominee), THE INTERIOR and DRAGON BONES, as well as the critically acclaimed memoir ON GOLD MOUNTAIN. The Organization of Chinese American Women named her the 2001 National Woman of the Year. She lives in Los Angeles.

Critical Praise

"I was mesmerized by this wondrous book --- the story of a secret civilization of women, who actually lived in China not long ago. . . . Magical, haunting fiction. Beautiful."

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