

## Snow Flower and the Secret Fan

by Lisa See

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### 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. 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 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?
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

In her beloved *New York Times* bestsellers SNOW FLOWER AND THE SECRET FAN, PEONY IN LOVE, and, most recently, SHANGHAI GIRLS and DREAMS OF JOY, Lisa See has brilliantly illuminated the strong bonds between women, romantic love, and love of country. Now, in CHINA DOLLS, which is about Asian-American nightclub performers of the 1930s and 1940s, she returns to these timeless themes. The *San Francisco Chronicle* praised the novel, stating, "China Dolls plunges us into a fascinating history and offers an accessible meditation on themes that are still urgent in our contemporary world. The women's story explores burning questions about the possibilities of friendship, the profound effects of betrayal, the horrors of prejudice and the nature of ambition --- especially female ambition. . . . These Asian artists were true pioneers, breaking ground, chasing vast dreams, subverting stereotypes simply by appearing onstage against the odds. Here, in China Dolls, they have found another stage of sorts, another place to rightfully shine." The *Washington Post* commented, "This emotional, informative and brilliant page-turner resonates with resilience and humanity," while *O Magazine* called CHINA DOLLS "a spellbinding portrait of a time burning with opportunity and mystery." The novel is Lisa See's fourth instant *New York Times* bestseller.

Ms. See has always been intrigued by stories that have been lost, forgotten, or deliberately covered up, whether in the past or happening right now in the world today. For SNOW FLOWER, she traveled to a remote area of China --- where she was told she was only the second foreigner ever to visit --- to research the secret writing invented, used, and kept a secret by women for over a thousand years. Amy Tan called the novel "achingly beautiful, a marvel of imagination." Others agreed, and foreign-language rights for SNOW FLOWER were sold to 39 countries. The novel also became a *New York Times* bestseller, a *Booksense* Number One Pick, has won numerous awards domestically and internationally, and was made into a feature film produced by Fox Searchlight.

Ms. See was born in Paris but grew up in Los Angeles. She lived with her mother, but spent a lot of time with her father's family in Chinatown. Her first book, ON GOLD MOUNTAIN: The One Hundred Year Odyssey of My Chinese-American Family (1995), was a national bestseller and a *New York Times* Notable Book. The book traces the journey of Lisa's great-grandfather, Fong See, who overcame obstacles at every step to become the 100-year-old godfather of Los Angeles's Chinatown and the patriarch of a sprawling family.

While collecting the details for ON GOLD MOUNTAIN, she developed the idea for her first novel, FLOWER NET (1997), which was a national bestseller, a *New York Times* Notable Book, and on the *Los Angeles Times* Best Books List for 1997. FLOWER NET was also nominated for an Edgar award for best first novel. This was followed by two more mystery-thrillers, THE INTERIOR (2000) and DRAGON BONES (2003), which once again featured the characters of Liu Hulan and David Stark. This series inspired critics to compare Ms. See to Upton Sinclair, Dashiell Hammett, and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

Ms. See has led an active and varied career. She was the *Publishers Weekly* West Coast Correspondent for thirteen years. As a freelance journalist, her articles have appeared in *Vogue*, *Self*, and *More*, as well as in numerous book reviews around the country. She wrote the libretto for Los Angeles Opera based on ON GOLD MOUNTAIN, which premiered in June 2000 at the Japan American Theatre followed by the Irvine Barclay Theatre. She also served as guest curator for an exhibit on the Chinese-American experience at the Autry Museum of Western Heritage, which then traveled to the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., in 2001. Ms. See then helped develop and curate the Family Discovery Gallery at the Autry Museum, an interactive space for children and their families that focuses on Lisa's bi-racial, bi-cultural family as seen through the eyes of her father as a seven-year-old boy living in 1930s Los Angeles. She has designed a walking tour of Los Angeles Chinatown and wrote the companion guidebook for Angels Walk L.A. to celebrate the opening of the MTA's Chinatown metro station. She also curated the inaugural exhibition --- a retrospective of artist Tyrus Wong --- for the grand opening of the Chinese American Museum in Los Angeles.

Ms. See serves as a Los Angeles City Commissioner on the El Pueblo de Los Angeles Monument Authority. She was honored as National Woman of the Year by the Organization of Chinese American Women in 2001 and was the recipient of the Chinese American Museum's History Makers Award in Fall 2003. Ms. See lives in Los Angeles.

### Critical Praise

"Only the best novelists can do what Lisa See has done, to bring to life not only a character but an entire culture, and a sensibility so strikingly different from our own. This is an engrossing and completely convincing portrayal of a woman shaped by suffering forced upon her from her earliest years, and of the friendship that helps her to survive."

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