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Powerful love stories shape exotic tale

"The Piano Teacher" by Janice Y. K. Lee

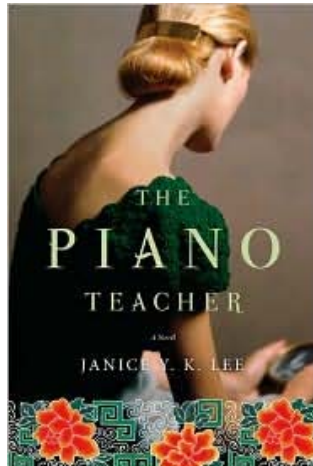
By Jessica Reaves | Tribune reporter
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One of the most haunting moments in Janice Y. K. Lee's debut novel occurs late in the book, when the primary love story ends—it happens so suddenly and the tragedy of it is so understated that you may feel, as I did, the need to re-read the passage, just to make sure you didn't misunderstand the characters' words, or the author's intent.

The best writers recognize that as readers, as in life, our brains crave definitive beginnings and endings, the neat package, the clean break. Our hearts, however, can accept, even welcome, uncertainty. Lingering doubt allows for glimmers of foolhardy hope, even in the face of overwhelming evidence: Maybe things will work out. Maybe this time there will be a happy ending.

Lee, a former literary editor at Elle magazine, clearly understands this fundamental tension; she has capitalized beautifully upon it in "The Piano Teacher," her sweeping, immensely entertaining account of [World War II](#) and its impact on Hong Kong's privileged classes.

Populated by colorful, defiantly flawed characters during the brutal Japanese occupation of Hong Kong and its decades-long, blame-filled aftermath, "The Piano Teacher" is shaped by two diametrically opposed love stories.



The first begins in 1941 and concerns the passionate, ultimately dangerous affair between Trudy Liang, an impossibly glamorous, wildly impulsive Hong Kong socialite, and Will Truesdale, an Englishman whose arrival coincides with the run-up to war and whose staid demeanor saves his life but costs him much more.

The second takes place 10 years later, as Will, aided by Claire Pendleton, a newlywed Englishwoman whose initial distaste for the strangeness of Hong Kong eventually gives way to a fascination verging on obsession, struggles to come to terms with his role in wartime atrocities.

Lee also has imagined a compelling cast of secondary characters. Trudy's family members represent the range of responses to war and the Japanese occupation, while Claire's journeys through 1950s Hong Kong society reveal the brutal consequences of exceptional bravery—and

all-too-human cowardice—in the face of danger. Throughout, the characters grapple with The Big Questions: What is love? What does it mean to belong somewhere, or to someone? Is possession—of a thing, a person, a place—ever truly possible?

While the story starts off a bit pokily—Claire's initial appearance inspires tepid interest, at best—things pick up quickly, and by the book's halfway point, the seemingly disjointed opening scenes have been woven into the larger narrative, and are beginning, at least, to make sense. This is not to imply that everything resolves in a neat, cut-and-dried fashion, part of this book's enormous appeal is its author's refusal to tie up every loose end or satisfy our every curiosity. We, like the characters we've grown so attached to, are left to contend with nagging uncertainties, left to puzzle out the meaning of a gesture, a smile, or a door left tantalizingly ajar.

As dedicated readers know, there are almost as many ways to judge an author as there are authors themselves. But if we measure the skill of a fiction writer by her ability to create characters and atmosphere so effortlessly real, so alive on the page, that the reader feels a sense of participatory anxiety—as if the act of reading gives one the power to somehow influence the outcome of purely imaginary events—then Lee should be counted among the very best in recent memory.

Evocative, poignant and skillfully crafted, "The Piano Teacher" is more than an epic tale of war and a tangled, tortured love story. It is the kind of novel one consumes in great, greedy gulps, pausing (grudgingly) only when absolutely necessary.

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The Piano Teacher

By Janice Y. K. Lee

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