

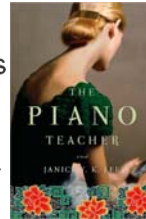
# The Dallas As seen in Morning News

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## Historical novel 'The Piano Teacher' hits the right notes

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By ANNE MORRIS / Special Contributor to The Dallas Morning News  
books@dallasnews.com Anne Morris, a member of the National / The Dallas Morning News s Circle, lives in Austin.



Strong, fresh characters and an exotic Hong Kong setting make Janice Lee's debut historical novel a pleasure to read.

Because she grew up in Hong Kong and is living there again after spending many years in the United States, the author is able to provide rich details on setting and nuances about society that an outsider might miss.

Lee's novel alternates chapters set in World War II Hong Kong with those set in the early 1950s. It centers on two women, Trudy and Claire, who fall in love with the same man, but at different times in his life.

One woman is uninhibited, rich and sophisticated. The other woman is naive, a work in progress. The book begins and ends with her.

She's 28-year-old Claire Pendleton, the piano teacher of the title. Claire grew up poor in England, expecting little out of life. But Martin – slow, steady and kind – asked her to marry him and follow his job to Hong Kong. That changed everything.

Once there, she finds unsatisfying work teaching piano to a pudgy Chinese girl who never practices. Suddenly, Claire begins to steal small valuable objects from this wealthy, powerful household. The first theft is accidental – a porcelain rabbit falls into her purse.

Readers may have difficulty believing sweet Claire would keep the rabbit and go on to take scarves, fancy napkins, jewelry and even perfume befitting a wealthy woman. Or that she would stand silent and allow the Chinese maid to be fired for it.

But this does set the stage for Claire to begin an affair with glamorous Will Truesdale while dull, good-hearted Martin is busy working at the Department of Water Services.

Amazingly, in the course of the book, Claire will become a character readers can like, because Hong Kong allows her to change, and change again.

But the character who truly energizes this novel is not Claire. It's Trudy Liang, a half-Chinese, half-Portuguese beauty whom Will met shortly after moving to Hong Kong. Their love story goes from scenes of nonstop parties at houses of English and Chinese with great wealth to the sudden horrors of a wartime invasion by the Japanese.

Before the invasion, war seemed impossible. "Will remembers this time well, how it was all so funny, how the war was so far away, yet talked about every day, how no one really thought about what might really happen."

Will goes to a harsh internment camp for English and Americans. Trudy remains outside, where she survives by trading favors with a swinish Japanese officer.

Lee ties together the Trudy and Claire sections neatly at the end of the novel and even throws in a surprise or two.

Anne Morris, a member of the National Book Critics Circle, lives in Austin.

The Piano Teacher

Janice Y.K. Lee

Viking, \$25.95