

As seen in

January 19, 2008



Colonial Rondo

A novel about the affairs of a Hong Kong couple's hired help.

BY LISA FUGARD

“THAT’S us, the British colonials, battling against our circumstances, always,” the formidable Edwina Storch says to Claire Pendleton over tea one sweltering afternoon. Most of the colony’s British residents are cultivating a lifestyle of potted palms and potted duck. But not 28-year-old Claire. While her compatriots wilt and sweat, she glows. Hong Kong suits her. “Something about

Also in their employ, as a chauffeur, is an enigmatic Englishman, Will Truesdale.

In sleek, spare prose, Lee plays with the growing erotic tension between Claire and Will. Here he is approaching her, cutting “the space between them in half, and half again, coming at her with those hooded, sardonic eyes.” “Be good to me,” Claire cautions him. Will’s response is noncommittal. Claire is sexually charged and curious, the affair with Will her rite of passage. She’s also insightful enough to realize that the headier intoxication is with herself, the newly emerging Claire — a woman who indulges in petty thievery and has a lover; a woman more comfortable among the throngs of Chinese at the city’s wet markets than at the teas and cocktail parties on the Peak, where some of the colony’s wealthiest members reside.

Lee has made the bold (and successful) decision to write a novel in which none of her characters are particularly endearing. Will can be cruel and self-absorbed; Claire is often prejudiced. And the upper echelons of Hong Kong society, through which they both pass, are rife with pettiness and jealousy. Many of these people have been deeply scarred by the Japanese occupation — just how deeply Claire will eventually discover as she learns more about Will Truesdale’s past.

Will’s entree into Hong Kong took place in the summer of 1941 through his rela-



tionship with a quixotic Eurasian named Trudy Liang. Driven by deep insecurities, Trudy was part Holly Golightly, part Mata Hari — charming, insulting, scheming and above all captivating. In one of the novel’s retrospective scenes, at a party on the beach, conversation ceases as “they all watch her, rapt, as she plunges into the sea and comes up sleek and dripping — her slim body a vertical rebuke to the flatness of the horizon between the sky and sea.”

In December 1941, six months after Will met Trudy, the Japanese invaded Hong Kong. In small but riveting vignettes, Lee evokes the turmoil and fear that seized residents during the occupation, a time when Will and Trudy and the Chens made choices that have rippled through the war years and into Claire’s future.

“The Piano Teacher” is laced with intrigue concerning a hoard of Chinese artifacts called the Crown Collection that went missing during the war (like the artworks owned by the real-life Hong Kong businessman Paul Chater). But while the inevitable “who did what and when and why” that dominates the last third of the novel is satisfying because it answers all those questions, readers will be more enthralled by Lee’s depiction of Will’s relationships with his two lovers — “Claire, with her blond and familiar femininity, English rose to Trudy’s exotic scorpion” — and the unsparring way Lee unravels them.

THE PIANO TEACHER

By Janice Y. K. Lee.
326 pp. Viking. \$25.95.

the tropical clime had ripened her appearance, brought everything into harmony.”

Janice Y. K. Lee’s first novel, “The Piano Teacher,” opens with the newlywed Claire traveling to Hong Kong in 1951 with her husband, Martin, an engineer. Of their marriage Lee writes, “She was not so attracted to him, but who was she to be picky, she thought, hearing the voice of her mother.” Soon Claire is hired as a piano teacher for the daughter of a wealthy Chinese couple, Victor and Melody Chen.

Lisa Fugard is the author a novel, “Skinner’s Drift.”