

# As seen in *The Oregonian*

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## Fiction review: "The Piano Teacher"

by Sharon Martell, special to *The Oregonian*  
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In desperate times, when survival is the only goal, an individual's true character is revealed. Janice Y.K. Lee's striking debut novel, "[The Piano Teacher](#)," opens a window into life in Hong Kong during and after the Japanese invasion of World War II, where values are laid bare and individual choices have ramifications well beyond what anyone can imagine.

The plot sounds like a potboiler, but Lee's literary skills and her underlying analysis of values and character lift the novel to a higher level.

In 1941, Hong Kong is a bustling city under British rule. Impoverished local workers brush against a British expatriate society flourishing under illusions of wealth, grace and superiority.

Amid this startling collision of Eastern and Western cultures, Trudy Liang, a bold Eurasian socialite, and Will Truesdale, a newly arrived Englishman, begin a passionate affair. But the invasion of Japanese forces threatens their relationship: Will is sent to an internment camp, while Trudy remains on the outside forced to make dangerous alliances with the Japanese *gendarmierie*. As they and others struggle to survive, betrayals ripple through their fragile community.

Ten years later, Claire Pendleton, a provincial newlywed, arrives in Hong Kong and lands a plush job teaching piano to the uninterested daughter of Victory and Melody Chen, an elite Chinese couple. She soon begins an affair with the Chens' chauffeur, an embattled Will Truesdale. As their relationship develops, Claire realizes that her lover is hiding a devastating history to which her employers are linked. The intrigues of past and present merge as Claire learns that repercussions of the war still resonate throughout the complicated city she now calls home.

It is to be expected that opportunists will thrive during wartime, yet more revealing is how the average "good" citizen will react. Who will betray his values to ensure his own safety? Who will sacrifice himself in the name of integrity? The answers can be surprising. Lee does not shy away from showing the grit and menace inherent in war -- on the sides of both the conquering and the conquered.

Lee's Hong Kong is evocative and cinematic. Sights, sounds and smells are all richly described and anchor the narrative firmly to a sense of time and place. Her background allows her a unique perspective of the city -- as both a local and an outsider. Born in Hong Kong, she lived there until the age of 15. A Harvard graduate and former editor at *Elle* magazine, she later returned to Hong Kong and lives there now. These experiences vitalize her narrative and help emphasize the cultural divide between locals and expatriates.

"The Piano Teacher" is a compelling story; at once raw, cutting and beautiful. It unfolds slowly -- characters and plot are selectively revealed, without judgment. Yet they remain fascinating and persuasive. The concealment and layering mirrors how carefully we choose to reveal ourselves to others -- especially when survival is on the line. And Lee deftly raises the question: Can others' perceptions of ourselves affect who we really are at our core?

**Details:** *THE PIANO TEACHER*  
Janice Y.K. Lee, Viking  
\$25.95, 328 pages

**Reading:** Lee reads from "The Piano Teacher" at 7:30 p.m. Tuesday at Powell's City of Books, 1005 W. Burnside St.

