

'The Piano Teacher,' by Janice Y.K. Lee

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The Piano Teacher

By Janice Y.K. Lee

IMAGES



Gaspar Trinaale

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Viking; 328 pages; \$25.95

Does one read grand love stories in fiction anymore? If not, Janice Y.K. Lee's first novel, "The Piano Teacher," is a bargain, because it has not one but two epic romances. Both tales involve denizens of Hong Kong's monied expat community, though one takes place during the Second World War and the other 10 years later, when everyone (more or less) is a damaged survivor, having been complicitous in or self-destructively resistant to the events of 1941 and 1942.

The man in the romances is the same: Will Truesdale, a handsome Brit who just happens off a boat and into Hong Kong and never leaves. Will is swept into the orbit of Trudy Liang, a vivacious, beautiful woman who alternately charms and appalls the fashionable society of which she is very much the center, even though, as a Eurasian, she is also a perpetual outsider. Her movie star elan captivates in peacetime; during the war, the breezy glamour is a tool for survival.

A decade later, Will encounters a very different but equally vivid creature, Claire Pendleton, an initially shy, rather naive wife of a British engineer. An emotional "have-not" among those who "have," Claire slowly acquires things in Hong Kong: love, experience, information. Somewhat surprisingly, her "taking" begins with actual theft.

"It started as an accident," the novel opens. "The small Herend rabbit had fallen into Claire's purse." Soon enough, Claire is purposefully swiping small items - a silk scarf, Irish napkins - from Victor and Melody Chen, the wealthy parents of Locket, Claire's (only) piano student.

The drama of Will's two affairs emerges in a braided narrative, sections from the early 1940s alternating with sections from the 1950s, and the point of view roaming from character to character but focusing primarily on the hearts and minds of Will and Claire. The result is entirely engrossing, the material about the two romances dovetailing for the complex, dark story of the wartime experiences of Chinese collaborators, Japanese officials, imprisoned socialites and those allied civilians who worked a deal to keep themselves out of the Japanese internment camps.

Lee's subject matter echoes elements of Kazuo Ishiguro's 2000 novel "When We Were Orphans." Though Ishiguro's novel was set in Shanghai, it likewise concerned upper-crust British civilians on the eve of the Second World War. Lee's story - though not an explicit detective story, like Ishiguro's - has plenty of mystery, providing surprises until its final pages, especially about the wartime events that occasion the puzzling relationships and behaviors of the characters during the 1950s.

Why does Will go to Macau to steal an object from Trudy's best friend's grave? Why is Will, in the 1950s, the driver for the wealthy Chens, the very people he socialized with in the 1940s? Why is Melody, Trudy's cousin, crying during Locket's piano lessons? Where is Trudy? What is there to know in this story and who knows it?

These questions and others entice but so does the vivid world of "The Piano Teacher," from the elegant hillside parties to the bathing beaches to the hot, thrumming city streets to the fetid internment cells. Each page of Lee's novel is full of arresting details, whether the moment is of high or low drama.

For instance, here's Claire, during her initial sail to Hong Kong, back when she's still prissy about all she encounters: "In Algiers, she had seen a man kiss a donkey and she couldn't discern whether the high odor was coming from one or the other, and in Egypt, the markets were the very definition of unhygienic - a fishmonger gutting a fish had licked the knife clean with his tongue."

Though "The Piano Teacher" is very much about personal (and community) identity, it never stoops to the overly simple notion that we show our true colors during strife. It does suggest, however, that the desire for survival can make morality nearly impossible.

How are we to understand the choices that people make in this novel? Lee leaves us with no didactic judgments, only the many pleasures of this intricate, remarkably assured, altogether enjoyable first novel.

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