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Strictly Fictional: In a strange land, peculiar things can seep right into your system

Reviewed by **Tiffany Lee-Youngren**
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The Piano Teacher
Janice Y.K. Lee

Viking, 336 pages, \$25.95

Don't be fooled by the sedate title of Janice Y.K. Lee's debut. Claire Pendleton, the novel's eponymous "piano teacher," might first appear as prim as could be, but once she steps off the ship in Hong Kong Harbor and begins to shed her stuffy British ways, Lee's narrative takes on all the drama of a Cantonese opera, where loyalty, love and faithfulness battle with patriotism and morality to alluring effect.

Claire lands in Hong Kong in 1952, having followed her newly wedded husband, a waterworks engineer, to the war-ravaged British colony. She's not altogether thrilled with the grimy city or its oppressive heat, but making the best of it, she finds work with the wealthy Chen family, who hire her as their daughter's piano teacher.

Also on the Chen's staff is Will Truesdale, a mysterious Brit who can barely suppress his scorn for the Chens beneath the brim of his chauffeur's cap. Will hasn't been the same since the war ended, and with it, his passionate love affair with Trudy Liang, the hothouse Eurasian flower alternately reviled and admired by Hong Kong socialites. Claire, desperate for adventure and an escape from her humdrum marriage, soon finds herself drawn into the city's tightly coiled social circles, and soon enough, into an affair with Truesdale.

"What would become of his story now?" Will wonders midway through the novel. "And there was Claire, who had grown important to him despite himself, in whom he saw his undeveloped self, nascent, with her silly prejudices, her cherished ignorance, and, surprisingly, her moments of clarity. Her naivete was a salve to his battered expectations. Wasn't love always some form of narcissism after all? She came unbidden to his dreams too, battling with the other woman, the one who haunted him day and night. Claire, with her blond and familiar femininity, English rose to Trudy's exotic scorpion."

Lee, a former features editor for *Elle* and *Mirabella* magazines, deftly interweaves the stories of Will, Trudy and Claire to capture the heartbreak of lost opportunity, and to demonstrate how unfamiliar experiences – a new home, a love affair, the dangers of war – can drain the innocence from us, day by day. "The Piano Teacher" is reminiscent of Shirley Hazzard's "The Great Fire" or Graham Greene's "The Quiet American," only less elliptical in style, making it fertile ground for book clubs that appreciate an international twist on the classic love triangle.