

FICTION

Song of Sorrow

An aimless wife in Hong Kong begins an affair with a damaged man.

By [Marie Arana](#)

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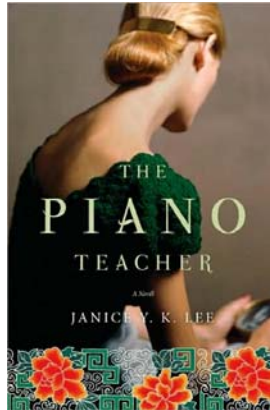
THE PIANO TEACHER

By Janice Y.K. Lee

Viking, 328 pp. \$25.95

War. Love. Betrayal. The harsh lessons of history. These are big subjects for any veteran writer, and yet, in her first novel, Janice Y.K. Lee confronts them admirably. *The Piano Teacher* is an intricate tale about the British colony of Hong Kong during World War II, when the island's inhabitants were overrun by Japanese forces, suffered a harrowing occupation and emerged profoundly shaken -- their sense of self undone.

It's hard to imagine a more complicated theme. Few have dealt with it successfully: J.G. Ballard did so in *Empire of the Sun*, about a lone English boy in Shanghai during the Japanese invasion; Graham Greene, too, in *The Quiet American*, about the French in Saigon after the war; and J.G. Farrell in *The Singapore Grip*, about British bankers in 1939, on the verge of a terrible conflagration. These are superb novels that manage to convey the divided loyalties, sudden reversals of fortune and deadly opportunism that a colony in peril can breed.



The piano teacher of Lee's story is Claire Pendleton, a callow, rudderless young woman who comes to Hong Kong in 1952 as the bride of a British engineer. She is somewhat bored with her languid new life and deeply repelled by her own husband. "Martin was older, in his forties, and had never had luck with women. The first time he kissed her, she had to stifle the urge to wipe her mouth." But Martin has whisked her away from stodgy old England, a menial job at an insurance company and an overbearing mother. Claire arrives in the colony full of curiosity, pleasantly surprised by its alluring bustle and

unfamiliar ways.

She is soon hired as a piano teacher for the chubby, pre-pubescent daughter of Victor and Melody Chen, who live in a vast mansion with many rooms, bursting with attentive servants. Claire decides to trade on her modest musical abilities "as a lark -- something to fill the day," but in truth she needs the extra money. Before long, she is pilfering from her wealthy employers. Nothing too obvious: a pretty scarf, a bottle of perfume, a porcelain rabbit. In time, she falls into a torrid affair with the Chens' chauffeur.

But the driver is no ordinary servant. Will Truesdale is an Englishman with an acute sense of irony, a pronounced limp and a complicated past. How and why this sophisticated, taciturn man has been reduced to such bitter circumstances, Claire does not know or dare to ask. She simply follows her impulse to leaven a dull marriage, fall into a stranger's bed and surrender to carnal desire. "I don't like to love," he tells her eventually. "You should be forewarned. I don't believe in it. And you shouldn't either."

But love is precisely the key to Will's past. In alternating segments, Lee slowly unravels the tale of his long-ago liaison with the arrestingly beautiful and sharp-tongued Trudy Liang, a regular in the high-life of pre-war Hong Kong. Will and Trudy are bon vivants: he, an executive with Asiatic Petrol; she, a Eurasian, "the mother a Portuguese beauty, the father a Shanghai millionaire." In 1941, in the full glow of their golden lives, Will and Trudy promise each other a love free of commitment or sentimentality -- a love that transcends the mundane.

The mundane is ushered in all too quickly, however, when Japanese forces invade Hong Kong, herd its British residents into concentration camps and coerce the Chinese locals to serve them in hitherto unimaginable ways. Trudy and Will are tested by hunger, separation and, finally, a tragic turn of events. Little wonder Will is a broken man.

As the novel proceeds, time leaps vigorously back and forth from 1952 to 1941, with Will in the middle, at once gradually revealed and progressively unrecognizable. What consumes Claire all the while -- answered only on the very last page -- is: Who was Trudy Liang, after all? What became of her? And why is Will so beholden to the Chens? These are questions on which so much turns, especially a piano teacher's hard-won education.

Let's make no false claims here. *The Piano Teacher* hardly rises to the level of novels by Ballard, Greene or Farrell. The decade jags can make for a jumpy narrative. The prose rarely sings. There are downright gaffes: Lee is all too capable of injecting verbal anachronisms ("Will was just the enabler") or clichés ("he sprawls into a chair, elegant limbs splayed out, the hunter having provided for his women").

Nevertheless, a persistent reader will be rewarded. There is something altogether haunting here. Perhaps it's the way the story advances, peeling its way from layer to layer until the truth of each character lies bare. Perhaps it's the way Lee shows us that war can make monsters of us all. Most memorably, however, it's her portrait of Hong Kong, which having witnessed so much cupidity, moves on with splendid indifference. Like a piano under different fingers. Or a siren with another song.

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