

LEISURE & ARTS

A CULTURAL CONVERSATION | *With Janice Y.K. Lee*

Historical Novelist by Accident

BY MARY KISSEL

Hong Kong

Janice Y.K. Lee's acclaimed World War II-era novel centers on a British piano teacher who steals and cheats on her husband; a Eurasian socialite who debases herself to survive the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong; and a reclusive driver scarred by the war.

But in contrast to her somber subjects, the author—a 37-year-old mother of four—is really rather perky.

"They're setting up, sorry!" Mrs. Lee says, waving to the Cantonese staff who are erecting folding chairs in the Helena May, a Hong Kong institution universally adored by ladies who lunch. The whitewashed club scores a mention in Mrs. Lee's debut novel, "The Piano Teacher." We are served peppermint tea (hers) and coffee (mine) in little porcelain cups, with saucers.

Mrs. Lee is an accidental historical novelist. "I usually read contemporary fiction," she explains. "And so I never would have said 'Oh, I'm gonna write this historical novel.'" An ethnic Korean, she grew up in Hong Kong and attended boarding school in New Hampshire. She went to Harvard, met her future husband, moved to New York, and worked as an assistant at Elle magazine. In the years that followed, she wrote book re-

views, magazine articles and "autobiographical" short stories. Mrs. Lee eventually enrolled in Hunter College to study writing, and in 2002 she began "The Piano Teacher" after returning to Hong Kong with her husband. Published in January, the book shot up the bestseller lists.

The novel was originally set in the 1970s, the period in which Mrs. Lee grew up. "Then I started reading about the war in Hong Kong," she says. She recast the novel, which took five years to complete, during wartime in the then-British territory—after combing through libraries in Manhattan and Hong Kong for memoirs and material. "Say what you say about colonialism... but it makes for good films and books," she quips.

"I think people are very solipsistic and we think that we invented everything, you know, in our generation, and then we started reading about people like Emily Hahn," Mrs. Lee says. Hired as the New Yorker's China correspondent in China in the 1930s, Ms. Hahn met Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai, got hooked on opium, and bore the illegitimate child of a British intelligence officer. She wrote over 50 books. "She was crazy," Mrs. Lee says with enthusiasm. "And I loved the fact that someone like her was in the '40s, because I would never have thought that such a liberated

woman could've existed in the '40s."

"The Piano Teacher" is laced with intrigue from the very first page, when the reader meets Claire Pendleton, a newly arrived, newlywed Brit who's been hired to give piano lessons to a young, well-to-do Chinese girl, Locket Chen. In the novel's first page, Mrs. Pendleton "accidentally" knocks an expensive figurine into her purse—and takes it home. Married to a staid civil servant, the young British woman is soon swept into an affair with the Chens' driver, Will Truesdale, who is recovering from a relationship with Trudy Liang, whom he met before the war.

The theme of "east meets west" runs throughout "The Piano Teacher." Will is an "adventurer" of "Scottish stock," born in Tasmania but settled in Hong Kong, with a stop in India along the way. Fully British Claire is absorbed into Hong Kong in short order—she wanders through wet markets (outdoor food bazaars) savors chestnut buns and physically blossoms in the place. Trudy, a Eurasian whose real name is Prudence, is described in the book as "often the only Chinese at a party, although she says she's not really Chinese—she's not really anything, she says."

The book is divided into three parts, and it's the middle bit where the reader sees how

Will and Trudy fare during the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong (Claire shows up after the war). I venture a volley: The war is the most interesting-section of the book, isn't it? "I didn't feel like it was *violent* enough," Mrs. Lee says with a chuckle and grin. Pardon? (The book includes descriptions such as: "her husband was grabbed by Japanese soldiers and made to clean up after bodies had been dragged along the street, shedding body parts like animals.")

Mrs. Lee pauses, then relates a scene from Jeffrey Eugenides's 2003 novel, "Middlesex," in which a character leaves home and returns to find "everyone in his family dead." She says: "I remember thinking that scene illustrated so deeply for me how war could do that for you in an instant. It was so perfect."

What did war wreak upon Hong Kong between 1941 and 1945? "The Piano Teacher" helps fill in the blanks. Mrs. Lee vividly describes prisoner-of-war camps, where the detainees ate "putrid boiled meat, a few rotting vegetables swimming in brown water," endured plagues "of the most enormous mosquitoes" and pests, and suffered diarrhea and random beatings. Yet a few prisoners with connections on the outside—like Will—could temporarily or permanently escape.

"There are versions of this story everywhere," Mrs. Lee notes. "As my friend said, World War II is the war that just keeps giving and giving to artists."

So do modern-day novelists explore Japan's World War II times as thoroughly as they've exercised Germany's? "I wouldn't call it Japanese brutality," Mrs. Lee says. "I would call



Zina Saunders

it 'war brutality.'" But what's wrong with fingering the offenders? "I think if you dig into any human's behavior in war, I think there's that group mentality. And I think there's that victor's mentality." I try to draw her out on this point, but to no avail. "I'm not a war expert," she says.

Mrs. Lee doesn't hold back, however, when I ask what makes for good fiction. "There are only so many stories," she says. "Boy meets girl, boy meets boy." (The latter is a contemporary phenomenon, obviously.) "If I read about a character, I like it when the character does something that surprises me... I'm interested in how people interact with each other in societies, in school, in work. How people work together on they don't work together."

Was it hard for Mrs. Lee, an ethnic Korean, to place herself in all these fictional ethnic shoes? "I think Trudy has roots in Emily Hahn, because Emily Hahn was the one who introduced me to that sort of person and that sort of society," she

says. The Brits, Will and Claire, "I had a lot of trouble with." Mrs. Lee worried about Claire's likability, as did her editor. "I think it's hard to read a book in which you hate the character. I mean, it's been done successfully very few times."

Our tea and coffee long drained, I steer the conversation back to Hong Kong and the Helena May. "People always ask me, 'Where should I go if I want to see this [World War II era] Hong Kong?' And I think, *ugh!* You can come to the Helena May—for the exterior... And the wet markets are good, definitely." But "at the same time, whenever I read about the past, I remember thinking the more things change, the more they remain the same."

Ms. Kissel is the editorial page editor of The Wall Street Journal Asia.

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