

BOOKS

Review: 'The Expatriates,' by Janice Y.K. Lee

REVIEW: Grief and motherhood link the lives of three American women abroad.

By LINDA SIMON Special to the Star Tribune | JANUARY 9, 2016 — 2:00PM

In her second novel, "The Expatriates," Janice Y.K. Lee ("The Piano Teacher") returns to Hong Kong, the teeming metropolis where she was born and raised, whose social life she knows intimately. This time, her focus is on the expatriate community, "a veritable U.N. of fortune-seekers, willing sheep, life-changers, come to find their future selves."

Among that disparate group are three women: Hilary, a Californian who came with her husband, David, a lawyer; Margaret, with her husband, Clarke, and their three children, and Mercy, a young Korean-American, graduate of Columbia, who arrived in the city at age 24 seeking some direction and purpose.

"Hong Kong was supposed to have been a new start," she reflects, but instead her life seems to veer far off course. Lee traces each woman's story in interwoven chapters, unraveling mysteries, yearnings and the coincidences that bring them together. Hilary is depressed: For the past eight years, she has been trying to have a child; on the verge of adopting an orphan to whom she is giving piano lessons, she finds out, through the gossip that seeps insidiously among the expats, that David is having an affair.

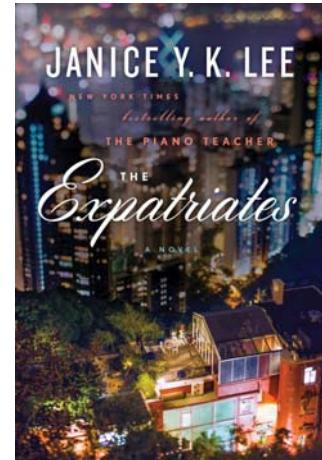
Margaret is grieving: Her youngest son has been abducted, and there seems no hope of finding him. And Mercy is at sea, buffeted by events over which she has no control, and some that she does. Mercy was nanny to Margaret's children when the unthinkable happened: During a family vacation trip to Korea, Mercy was alone with the children when Margaret darted into a Starbucks to use the bathroom. By the time she came out, the little boy had disappeared into the bustling, crowded streets.

Margaret's grief is public knowledge. At a dinner party, Hilary notices that Margaret "seemed tentative all the time now, as if she was trying to lead a normal life but had forgotten how." Margaret's loss, Hilary's abiding desire and Mercy's increased complicity in their lives highlight the women's intense attachment to motherhood.

Margaret is surprised by "how much she would love, really love, being a mother and having kids, how natural it was to her, how everything else paled in its intensity and pleasure of experience." Being a mother is a life changer that transcends time and place.

Lee's serene, muted tone occasionally falls flat, but more often gently conveys her sad characters' loneliness, suffering and anguish.

Linda Simon's most recent book is "The Greatest Shows on Earth: A History of the Circus."



THE EXPATRIATES
http://immedia.startribune.com/images/ows_145220902
 "The Expatriates," by Janice Y.K. Lee
 By: Janice Y.K. Lee.

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