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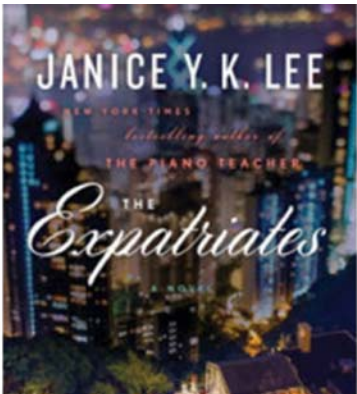
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'The Expatriates' explores three overlapping lives in Hong Kong

Three expats seek out love, happiness, and identity in a bustling 21st-century melting pot.

By **Terry Hong** | JANUARY 12, 2016

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The Expatriates
By Janice Y.K. Lee
Viking
332 pp.

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While Janice Y.K. Lee’s **The Expatriates** might be one of your first reads of this new year, you will not be allowed to forget this book as 2016 draws to a close. Mark my words: “The Expatriates” will appear repeatedly on year-end award nominations and all the “best of” compilations.

When it comes to novels, the Hong Kong-born, Harvard-educated, New York-domiciled Korean-American Lee is two for magnificent two: Her 2009 debut, “The Piano Teacher,” garnered rave reviews and spent months on bestseller lists in 26 languages; her “Expatriates,” which hits shelves this month, fulfills long-awaited anticipation and should meet with similar – if not even greater – success.

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Set decades after the World War II milieu of “The Piano Teacher,” in “The Expatriates” Lee returns again to Hong Kong, this time to a 21st-century setting populated with “new expatriates [who] arrive practically every hour.... Chinese, Irish, French, Korean, American, a veritable UN of fortune-seekers, willing sheep, life-changers, come to find their future selves.”

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Amid this throng, three arrivals – all women for whom “home” remains stateside – will find their lives overlap and converge, in spite of different backgrounds, expectations, and outcomes. Somehow, over the course of two-plus years, they will eventually find themselves gathered in the same room, sharing the uncertainty of what lies ahead.

Mercy Cho, a Korean-American from Queens, New York, arrived at age 24 to find that her Ivy League pedigree failed to open any doors to opportunity. In spite of her attempt to make a “new start,” she’s been unable to escape the “bad luck” that continues to plague her (irrationally, she knows) since she was 13. Her young life – so far – is defined by a horrific tragedy that will not allow her to move forward; survival for now means being sequestered in her “two-hundred-square-foot studio, but she does not have to live like a savage,” serving herself elegant salads to mollify the hunger that will not abate. “[S]he wonders when she’s supposed to start her life again, when she is allowed.”

For a few short months, Mercy helped to care for the children of Margaret Reade, who also arrived with her husband’s multinational posting that took the family from northern California to this “hermetically sealed” expat existence, “as if they live in Hong Kong but are untouched by it.”

Margaret “on first glance seemed perfect.” When Mercy initially meets her, Mercy is convinced that “Margaret was one of those women who ... didn’t recognize a mean person, since no one would ever be mean to her, or

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snotty, or distracted.... She had never known condescension in her life.”

Margaret, her husband, their children, with Mercy accompanying, travel to Seoul, South Korea, for the winter holidays. There Margaret meets her extended relatives attached to her one-quarter Korean heritage – and loses her own immediate family as she knows it.

Returning to Hong Kong, Margaret must reenter some semblance of normalcy. In one of her rare social outings, she attends a dinner party at the home of fellow expat Hilary Starr and her lawyer husband. Childhood acquaintances whose mothers were friends in California, Margaret and Hilary have not seen each other “in years, maybe decades, until they ran into each other at the airport,” both on their way to one of those exotic vacations expected of a certain privileged class of expats. While Hilary might be the wife who followed the hired spouse, her independent wealth provides her unexpected agency. The conclusion of that evening’s soiree launches a point of no return in Hilary’s life.

Through unforeseen experiences and unintended meetings, these three women will come to share a relationship that can’t be labeled, that would never have been chosen, and yet can never be denied.

“‘Hong Kong is so small,’ ” its expat residents echo again and again. Little goes unseen in this temporary fishbowl existence of foreigners abroad. Lee’s own intimate knowledge of Hong Kong’s expat community – Lee’s parents were Korean immigrants to the cosmopolitan island – is at turns illuminating, entertaining, cringe-inducing, piercing, all.

With meticulous details and nuanced observations, Lee creates an exquisite novel of everyday lives in extraordinary circumstances. Friendship, love, marriage, parenthood are all momentous, defining events in so many human lives; so, too, are uncertainty, betrayal, loss, and more. How Lee’s triumvirate reacts, copes, and ventures forth (or not) proves to be a stupendous feat of magnetic, transporting storytelling.

Terry Hong writes [BookDragon](#), a book blog for the [Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center](#).

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