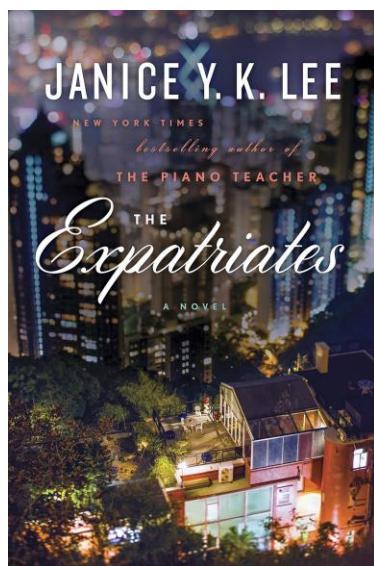


[Blanca Torres](#) 

Three Hong Kong expats and their intersecting stories

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Janice Y.K. Lee's new novel "The Expatriates" follows three American women as they try to find themselves in the exotic cultural mix of Hong Kong. Lee appears Tuesday, Jan. 19, at Seattle's Elliott Bay Book Co.

Foreigners who move to exotic Hong Kong might expect to find reprieve from their lives back home and anonymity among the bustling metropolis.

But in "The Expatriates," New York author Janice Y.K. Lee's latest novel (Viking, 336 pp., \$27.95), three American women find that no amount of bright lights, tall buildings and masses of people can distract them from confronting harsh realities.

Lee delivers the stories of Mercy, Margaret and Hilary with smooth, palatable and at times exquisite prose. The book is the second novel from Lee, who dazzled readers and critics with her 2009 debut novel, “The Piano Teacher,” also set in her native Hong Kong.

Author appearance

Janice Y.K. Lee

The author of “The Expatriates” will appear at 7 p.m. Tuesday, Jan. 19, at Elliott Bay Book Co., 1521 10th Ave., Seattle; free (206-624-6600 or elliottbaybook.com).

“The Expatriates” follows the three women, who seem to have in common only the fact that they live in Hong Kong. But, as the characters themselves point out at various times, Hong Kong is really a small place, and eventually their lives intersect in surprising ways.

Mercy is a recent college grad who has managed to break out of her working-class immigrant family into the Ivy League splendor of Columbia. Mercy, however, is a walking contradiction of a human; blessings double as curses. She lands at Columbia, making her Korean parents proud, and falls in with the “it” crowd — wealthy, party-going and glamorous friends. But she never feels adequate in her circle. It’s as if she’s an observer in her own life. She follows a close friend to Hong Kong, hoping to establish a career, but ends up scraping by with odd jobs — fits and starts with no real traction to becoming an adult.

Margaret embodies a middle-class ideal as a mom of three beautiful children and a loving, successful husband. Her ideal expat life — luxurious home, private club for leisure activities and lavish family vacations — is shattered by a harrowing incident.

Hilary also enjoys a cushy lifestyle, living in a gated home and financially secure, thanks to family money. She is a trailing spouse to

her lawyer husband, but her life is upended as she attempts to expand her family and save her brittle marriage.

The Hong Kong expat community also serves as a character in this tale. Americans arrive with a mindset that their stay will be temporary, like college — a time to explore a new environment and learn new cultures. But many end up feeling more American than ever. They pick up new habits, comforts and strategies for survival. They can either hide behind the facade of privilege or, as in the case of the three women in this novel, face up to their failings and misfortunes.

“The Expatriates” brims with the irony that privilege sometimes walks hand in hand with personal devastation. If it weren’t for Lee’s powerful, nuanced writing, the novel would easily fall flat as another chick-lit tale or a long chronicle of obnoxious first-world problems.

Instead, she deftly portrays her characters’ trying emotional journeys in a way that feels poignant and compelling. In the scene where Lee introduces Mercy, for example, not much happens, other than the character eating a salad. But Lee’s storytelling skills shine here in setting high emotional stakes — we quickly learn that Mercy is wounded and longing — an internal turmoil that sets the plot in motion.

“The Expatriates” moves with urgency, but also takes time to slowly reveal a complex story. Lee’s storytelling is intricate, precise and rich enough to keep the reader seduced until the end.

Blanca Torres is a Seattle Times editorial writer.