

KIRKUS

THE EXPATRIATES

Author: Janice Y.K. Lee

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Category: Fiction

In Lee's second novel after the bestselling *The Piano Teacher* (2009), Hong Kong sets the stage for stories of expatriation, cultural divide, and, most strikingly, the varying ways in which grief causes isolation, as seen through three connected women. "You can survive a tragedy, given time," thinks Mercy, a mid-20s Korean-American Columbia graduate who moved to Hong Kong for a fresh start after years of being unlucky in life. Unfortunately, a change in scenery doesn't cause much of a change in her happiness; desperate for a job, she agrees to accompany a wealthy American couple and their three children on a trip to Korea, where a terrible "incident" involving one of the children—that's what everyone chooses to call it, hardly capable of being direct—occurs and she is deemed responsible. The novel begins nearly a year later, a year during which grief has settled in Mercy's core, as well as in Margaret Reade's, the beautiful family matriarch who hired Mercy. As Mercy "wonders when she's supposed to start her life again, when she is allowed," Margaret is dealing with similar feelings—"she cannot live. She cannot not live"—and yet the two women are completely isolated from one another, and from their community of expats, whose beautiful families and lavish lifestyles now seem unreal, untouchable. Lee's portrayal of Margaret's grief is the most powerful; the quiet, daily suffering of a mother who's experienced unspeakable loss is profound: "she is aware of a black hole that she must avoid at all costs. She is teetering at the edge of it, peering down." The women's isolation is mirrored in Hong Kong's expat culture, which Lee describes in full-bodied detail, a culture painted in rich, tropical color—but only on the surface. A third woman, Hilary, is also connected to this story, but less intensely, and her experience with grief and isolation—while relatable—pales in comparison to Margaret's, as well as to Mercy's level of disassociation. An unfortunate side effect of unraveling tragedy is that these characters are lost in reflection, and so there's not much present action and the narrative is often lacking immediacy. Some plot threads beg for more conflict, others are simply forgotten—this book gets lost in thought. A richly detailed novel that rubs away at the luster of expat life and examines how the bonds of motherhood or, really, womanhood, can call back even those who are furthest adrift.

BOOKLIST

The Expatriates.

Lee, Janice Y. K. (Author)

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Lee (*The Piano Teacher*, 2009) has a special knack for getting into the minds of disparate individuals,

bringing those people together in unique circumstances and then allowing us to watch them work their way

through some pretty harrowing situations. In the expatriates' sector of Hong Kong, the lives of three

women converge. Margaret Reade and Hillary Starr are Americans married to high-powered, high-income

husbands who spend more time away from their wives than with them. Margaret has three children.

Hillary has none, but not for lack of trying. Mercy is a young, single, childless Columbia graduate who has

come to Hong Kong from New York City more or less to find herself. The theme of Americans being

expatriated to foreign countries by corporations is reminiscent of stories about early to mid-twentiethcentury

oil-company employees, making this feel dated. But the alternating voices of the women, connected by motherhood, make the stories worthwhile and personal.

— *Donna Chavez*