

snowflower and the secret fan

Snowflower and the Secret Fan is a poignant novel by Lisa See that explores the intricate bonds of female friendship amid the backdrop of 19th-century China. This historical fiction piece not only tells a captivating story but also delves into the cultural practices, societal norms, and emotional depth of its characters. The narrative centers around the lifelong friendship between two women, Lily and Snowflower, who communicate through a secret writing system known as *nu shu*, used exclusively by women.

Overview of the Novel

Published in 2005, "Snowflower and the Secret Fan" reflects on the complexities of female relationships in a repressive society. The novel is set in Hunan province and spans several decades, offering readers a glimpse into the lives of women who navigate the challenges of foot-binding, marriage, and motherhood.

Key Themes

- Friendship:** At its core, the novel is about the deep bond between Lily and Snowflower. It illustrates how their friendship provides solace and strength in a world that often marginalizes women.
- Cultural Practices:** The practice of foot-binding serves as a significant cultural element in the story, symbolizing the societal expectations placed on women. The physical and emotional pain associated with it is a recurring theme throughout the narrative.
- Communication:** The use of *nu shu*, a secret script, highlights the importance of communication among women. It reflects their desire for a voice in a patriarchal society and demonstrates how they find ways to express their innermost thoughts and feelings.
- Tradition vs. Change:** The novel contrasts traditional practices with the emerging changes in society,

particularly as the story unfolds into the 20th century. It invites readers to consider the impact of social change on women's lives.

Character Analysis

Lily

Lily is the protagonist of the story, a girl born into a family with a long line of foot-bound women. Her character evolves throughout the novel, showcasing her resilience and strength. Initially, she is a product of her environment, but as she faces various challenges, she learns to assert her identity and desires.

Snowflower

Snowflower is Lily's closest friend and confidante. Their bond is tested by societal expectations and personal hardships. Snowflower's character embodies the complexities of friendship—loyalty, betrayal, and ultimately, sacrifice.

Supporting Characters

- Lily's Mother: Represents the traditional expectations placed on women, particularly regarding foot-binding and marriage.
- Snowflower's Family: Their dynamics reflect the societal pressures women face and their roles within the family structure.

Historical Context

"Snowflower and the Secret Fan" is deeply rooted in the historical context of China during the 19th century. The practice of foot-binding, which began in the Song Dynasty, became a symbol of beauty and status. This painful tradition not only restricted women's mobility but also reinforced patriarchal control over their lives.

Foot-Binding

- Origins: Foot-binding began in the Song Dynasty as a means to enhance beauty. It became a widespread practice among the upper classes.
- Process: The process involved tightly binding the feet of young girls to alter their shape, often resulting in lifelong pain and disability.
- Symbolism: Foot-binding is a central symbol in the novel, representing the constraints placed on women and their struggle against societal norms.

Nu Shu

Nu shu is a fascinating aspect of the novel that serves as a secret language used by women in Hunan province. It allowed women to communicate in a society where their voices were often silenced.

- History: Nu shu was created by women as a way to express their thoughts and feelings without the influence of men.
- Usage: It was often used in letters, poetry, and stories shared among friends, thereby fostering a sense of community and understanding.

Plot Summary

The novel begins with the childhood of Lily and Snowflower, detailing their experiences with foot-binding and the formation of their friendship. They meet as young girls and form a deep bond through shared experiences and the use of nu shu. As they grow older, they navigate the complexities of marriage, motherhood, and societal expectations.

Key Events

1. Childhood Bonds: Lily and Snowflower's initial meeting and the development of their friendship.
2. Foot-Binding: The painful process and its implications on their lives.
3. Marriage: The contrasting marriages of Lily and Snowflower highlight the varying outcomes of their

choices.

4. Conflict: The strain on their friendship due to misunderstandings and societal pressures.

5. Resolution: The novel concludes with a reflection on their lives, emphasizing the enduring nature of their bond despite challenges.

Critical Reception

"Snowflower and the Secret Fan" received positive reviews for its rich storytelling and insightful portrayal of women's lives in historical China. Critics praised Lisa See for her ability to weave together personal narratives with broader social issues, making the story both intimate and far-reaching.

Awards and Recognitions

- Best Seller: The novel became a bestseller, resonating with a wide audience.
- Literary Awards: It has been nominated for various awards, recognizing its contribution to contemporary literature.

Conclusion

"Snowflower and the Secret Fan" is more than just a story of friendship; it is a profound exploration of the lives of women in a historical context that still resonates today. Through the lens of Lily and Snowflower's experiences, readers gain insight into the struggles, triumphs, and complexities of female relationships. Lisa See's novel stands as a testament to the resilience of women, their shared experiences, and the bonds that unite them.

In an age where discussions about gender equality and women's rights continue to evolve, "Snowflower and the Secret Fan" remains an important work that encourages reflection on the past and its implications for the future. Through its engaging narrative and rich historical context, the novel invites readers to consider the strength of friendship and the power of women's voices in a world that often seeks to silence them.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the main theme of 'Snow Flower and the Secret Fan'?

The main theme of 'Snow Flower and the Secret Fan' revolves around female friendship, the societal roles of women in 19th century China, and the concept of laotong, or sworn sisterhood.

Who are the two main characters in the novel?

The two main characters are Lily, a poor girl from a rural village, and Snow Flower, a girl from a wealthy family. Their lives intertwine through their laotong relationship.

What is the significance of the secret fan in the story?

The secret fan symbolizes the bond between Lily and Snow Flower, serving as a medium for their communication and the sharing of their inner thoughts, which is especially important in the context of their constrained lives.

How does the novel address the concept of foot-binding?

The novel addresses foot-binding as a painful tradition that symbolizes the oppression of women, illustrating how it affects the characters' lives and their views on beauty and worth.

What historical context does 'Snow Flower and the Secret Fan' provide?

The novel is set in 19th century China and provides historical context about the cultural practices, societal expectations, and the lives of women during this period, including issues like marriage and family honor.

How does the narrative structure of the book enhance its themes?

The narrative alternates between Lily's present and her memories, allowing readers to see the evolution of her relationship with Snow Flower and the impact of their choices over time, reinforcing themes of love, betrayal, and resilience.

What role does language play in 'Snow Flower and the Secret Fan'?

Language, particularly the use of nu shu, a secret writing system for women, plays a crucial role in the novel, representing the characters' inner lives and their need for expression in a patriarchal society.

What challenges do Lily and Snow Flower face in their friendship?

Lily and Snow Flower face numerous challenges, including societal pressures, misunderstandings, and personal tragedies that test the strength of their bond and highlight the complexities of female relationships.

What message does the author, Lisa See, convey through the story?

Lisa See conveys messages about the importance of female bonds, the struggles women face in a patriarchal society, and the enduring nature of friendship, even amidst societal and personal upheavals.

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