

Snow Flower and the Secret Fan
By Lisa See
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Rating 5 of 5

A Carolyn Howard-Johnson Review for Ritters™

Unfolding the Mysteries of Culture, Language and Writing Subtly, Like the Whisper of a Fan

Reviewed by Carolyn Howard-Johnson, author of *This is the Place, Harkening: A Collection of Stories Remembered, Tracings*, and the How To Do It Frugally Series of book for writers

How does a reviewer appraise a book that is at once history, a saga, a literary novel, a book of poetry and a feminist force? What standards might she apply to the **structure**, the characterization, the dialogue, the premise? In this case maybe she would open it like fan, let it whisper its secrets one spoke at a time. Readers would see the value there and writers, too, would learn something of their craft.

This case, of course, is this review of *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* by Lisa See. It is the story of the mysterious and beautiful language of Nu Shu. I capitalize the name of this language even though See chose not to, probably because the Chinese women who wrote and spoke the language didn't. Although it was a language of position and identity, just as English or any other language is, it was also secret. The women who practiced it—it was more of a practice than merely a language that "merely" reflects and inspires a culture—probably wouldn't have thought to make their *nu shu* more than they thought their humble tongue might warrant. That is not to say they didn't recognize its importance in their lives.

The mystery of *Nu Shu* is brought alive by a woman of eighty who tells her own story and that of Moon Flower, her *laotong*—other self or "other same" as it is often translated. See doesn't call the first few chapters of this telling a **prologue**, but it is or could be, if she'd chosen to call it that. (Lesson number one for writers: We needn't necessarily abide protocol if there is a very good reason not to and we certainly needn't use the same old labels others have used when we choose to follow tradition.) This prologue of sorts is called "Sitting Quietly." It sets the reader up for the history and life of this ancient. After only three pages we meet Lily, a "so-so girl" not yet of foot-binding age, whom we quickly learn is the same woman who had just spoken to us of her long life. What a wonderful technique to suggest the credibility and wisdom of a retold story while keeping the reader enthralled with a first person adventure told in the moment.

This is also the story of *laotong*, a unique kind of love between girls that continues on through their married life and is peculiar (at least this particular incarnation) to ancient Chinese culture. It is a love-partnership that is both arranged and chosen, contracted as firmly as a marriage pact (in fact more firmly in the eyes of the participating women). The formalized love-friendship is bound to the language women of this singular ethnic group developed and practiced as a means of emotional—and sometimes physical—survival.

See's meticulous research and her channeling of this woman becomes a saga that lets the reader into the souls and times of pre-Mao China. To do this, See uses **narrative** heavily. She doesn't ignore that modern readers need their **dialogue** to feel part of the story and it might be missed if the dialogue she uses was not done so well. It rings with authenticity because she doesn't attempt to imitate an accent. She uses simple words and phrasing to achieve a Chinese lilt instead.

Snow Flower is heavy on telling because the story necessitates it; it works because it is told in **first person** so the reader has a sense that the narrative is spoken. It also works because the setting and culture are so fascinating that we are most happy to sit still in large enough chunks to absorb all this mystery, culture, repression, joy, sadness, and pain into our pores.

See also lets the reader learn of the intricacies of the culture, the characters and their relationships slowly, as Lily comes to understand them. That is an unfolding—one delicate rib of the fan at a time—that surely required as much planning as the most detailed mystery.

A national bestseller, this is a gripping novel but, for the writer, it can also be an illuminating text on the essentials of writing and even the intricacies of formatting and style. For the latter see page 14 of the paperback edition where See breaks the "No-Internal-Dialogue-In-Italics-Rule and the No-Emphasis-In-Italics Rule in one phrase (perhaps the only time in the entire book) with the poignant cry from the heart of a child for her mother to *See me! See me! See me!*

The chant may be a song, from the heart of the author who senses that if we see her, we might—regardless of the genre we write in—be better writers.

Carolyn Howard-Johnson's fiction and poetry are award-winners. She also writes the "Back to Literature" column for MyShelf.com and hosts a website (www.HowToDoltFrugally.com) where she works at making both reading and writing an adventure. Her how-to book, THE FRUGAL BOOK PROMOTER: HOW TO DO WHAT YOUR PUBLISHER WON'T, is an Irwin Award winner and was named USA Book News' "Best Professional Book 2004." The second in the series is THE FRUGAL EDITOR: PUT YOUR BEST BOOK FORWARD TO AVOID HUMILIATION AND ENSURE SUCCESS.