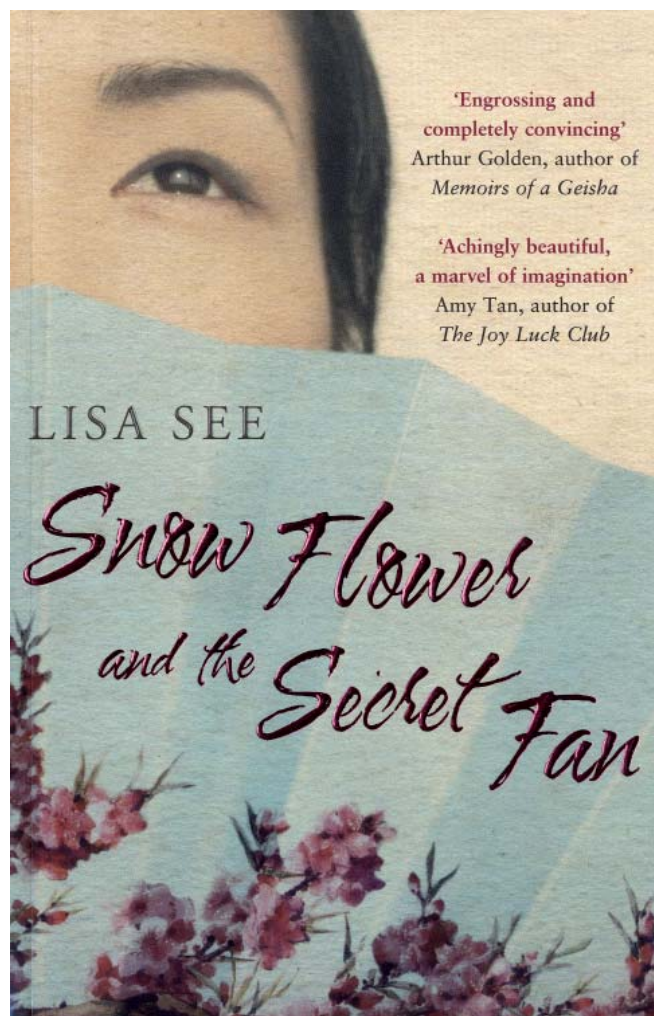


ALLEN & UNWIN



READING GROUP NOTES

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About the book

In brief

Snow Flower and the Secret Fan is a story of two extraordinary women surviving in a time of strict rules and ancient customs.

In nineteenth-century China, when wives and daughters were foot-bound and lived in almost total seclusion, the women in one remote Hunan county developed their own secret code for communication: nu shu (“women’s writing”). Lily is one such woman, and in this novel, haunted by memories, she recounts the tale of her friendship with Snow Flower, and asks the gods for forgiveness.

In detail

Lily is the daughter of a humble farmer in Yongming County, and to her family is just another mouth to feed until she can be married off. But when she is six years old she is brought before the ambitious local matchmaker who delivers some startling news: Lily is no ordinary girl. If they are bound properly, her feet will be flawless. In nineteenth-century China, where a woman’s eligibility is judged by the shape and size of her feet, this is extraordinarily good luck. Lily now has the power to make a good marriage and change the fortunes of her family.

But first she must undergo the agonies of footbinding, learn nu shu, the famed secret women’s writing, and make a very special friend. A girl will be chosen as her ‘old-same’ which is a relationship almost akin to marriage and treated with as much seriousness.

Her ‘old-same’, Snow Flower, is a wonder to Lily. She comes from a refined family and is elegant, educated, but cannot suppress her adventurous streak. Even though their worlds are far apart and they rarely see one another, the two girls develop a deep bond through their letters written in nu shu which they paint on fans and embroider on handkerchiefs. As the years go by, Lily and Snow Flower share the burden of being born female in feudal China and find comfort in their friendship until they come of age to be married. But a bitter reversal of fortune is about to change everything.

About the author

Lisa See is the author of *Flower Net*, *The Interior* and *Dragon Bones*, as well as the critically acclaimed memoir *On Gold Mountain*. The Organization of Chinese American Women named her the 2001 National Woman of the Year. She lives in Los Angeles.

For discussion

- ☞ Lily is the narrator, but is she the heroine or the villain? What are her flaws and her strengths?
- ☞ Do you think the concept of “old sames” exist today? Do you have an “old same” or are you part of a sworn sisterhood? In what ways are those relationships the same or different from the ones in nineteenth-century China?
- ☞ Some men in nineteenth-century China apparently knew about nu shu, the secret writing described in Snow Flower. Why do you think they tolerated such private communication?
- ☞ Lily’s writing her story so that Snow Flower can read it in the afterworld. Do you think she’s told her story in a convincing way so that Snow Flower can forgive and understand? Do you think Snow Flower would have told the story differently?
- ☞ When Lily and Snow Flower are girls, they have one intimate—almost erotic—moment together. Do you think their relationship was sexual or, given the times, were they simply girls who saw this as only an innocent extension of their friendship?
- ☞ Footbinding was a status symbol for men and increased a woman’s chances of marriage into a wealthier household. Women took great pride in their feet, which were considered not only beautiful but were also her best and most important feature. As a child, would you have fought against having your feet bound, as Third Sister did, knowing you would be consigned to the life of a servant or a “little daughter-in-law”? As a mother, would you have chosen to bind your daughter’s feet?
- ☞ The Chinese character for “mother love” consists of two parts: one meaning “pain,” the other meaning “love.” In your own experience, from the perspective of a mother or a daughter, is there an element of truth to this description of mother love?
- ☞ In the story, we are told again and again that women are weak and worthless. But were they really? In what ways did Lily and Snow Flower show their strength and value?
- ☞ Although the story takes place in the 19th century, and seems very far removed from our lives—we don’t have our feet bound, we’re free and mobile—do you think we’re still bound up in other ways by career, family obligations, conventions of feminine beauty, and events beyond our control like war, the economy, and natural disasters?
- ☞ Because of its phonetic nature, nu shu could easily be taken out of context and be misunderstood. Today many of us communicate though e-mail or instant messaging. Have you ever had an experience where one of your messages has been misunderstood because of lack of context, facial gestures, and tone of voice? Or have you ever been on the receiving end of a message that you read the wrong way and your feelings were hurt?
- ☞ Madame Wang, the matchmaker, is a bound-footed woman and yet she does business with men. How is she different from the other women in the story? Do you think she is considered a woman of status or is she merely a necessary evil?

Suggested further reading

Non-fiction

Wild Swans by Jung Chang

Red Dust by Ma Jian

Daughter of the River by Hong Yin

Fiction

The Good Earth by Pearl S Buck

Empress Orchid by Anchee Min

My Life as Emperor by Su Tong

To the Edge of the Sky by Anhua Gao

Music and Silence by Rose Tremain

A Suitable Boy by Vikram Seth

The Drink and Dream Teahouse by Justin Hill

Memoirs of a Geisha by Arthur Golden

Other books by Lisa See

Flower Net

The Interior

Dragon Bones

On Gold Mountain