

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY



Lisa See's new novel, *The Island of Sea Women*, is about the free-diving women of South Korea's Jeju Island. Booklist called *The Island of Sea Women* "stupendous... enthralling...and engrossing." Jodi Picoult has given her praise: "Lisa See excels at mining the intersection of family, friendship and history, and in her newest novel, she reaches new depths exploring the matrifocal haenyeo society in Korea, caught between tradition and modernization. This novel spans wars and generations, but at its heart is a beautifully rendered story of two women whose individual choices become inextricably tangled." Independent booksellers honored the novel by selecting it as an Indie Next pick, while Barnes & Noble chose the novel for its nationwide March 2019 Book Club.

Ms. See is the New York Times bestselling author of *The Tea Girl of Hummingbird Lane*, *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, *Peony in Love*, *Shanghai Girls*, *China Dolls*, and *Dreams of Joy*, which debuted at #1. She is also the author of *On Gold Mountain*, which tells the story of her Chinese American family's settlement in Los Angeles. Ms. See has also written a mystery series that takes place in China. Her books have been published in 39 languages. See was the recipient of the Golden Spike Award from the Chinese Historical Association of Southern California and the History Maker's Award from the Chinese American Museum. She was also named National Woman of the Year by the Organization of Chinese American Women.

Ms. See wrote the libretto for Los Angeles Opera based on *On Gold Mountain*, which premiered in June 2000. That same year, she also curated the exhibition *On Gold Mountain: A Chinese American Experience* at the Autry Museum. Ms. See then helped develop and curate the Family Discovery Gallery at the Autry Museum, an interactive space for children and their families that focused on Lisa's bi-racial, bi-cultural family. The installation was up for twelve years. In 2003, she curated the inaugural exhibition—a retrospective of artist Tyrus Wong—for the grand opening of the Chinese American Museum in Los Angeles. In addition, she designed a walking tour of L.A.'s Chinatown and wrote the companion guidebook for *Angels Walk L.A.* to celebrate the opening of the MTA's Chinatown station. As a longtime trustee on the University of California Press Foundation, she endowed the Lisa See Endowment Fund in Southern California History and Culture.

Ms. See lives in Los Angeles.

- Author's website

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the significance of the epigraph. *The Book of Songs* is the oldest extant collection of Chinese poetry, written between the seventh and eleventh centuries B.C. What kind of resonance does it have today?
2. *The Tea Girl of Hummingbird Lane* begins with the Akha aphorism, “No coincidence, no story.” What are the major coincidences in the story? Are they believable? How important are they in influencing your reaction to the novel as a whole?
3. Perhaps the most shocking moment in the novel comes with the birth of the twins and what happens to them. A-ma explains that “only animals, demons, and spirits give birth to litters. If a sow gives birth to one piglet, then both must be killed at once. If a dog gives birth to one puppy, then they too must be killed immediately” (pages 27–28). The traditions surrounding twins are very harsh, to say the least, but were you able to understand what happens to them within the context of Akha culture? How does this moment change Li-yan’s view of Akha Law, and what are the consequences? Are there any aspects of the Akha culture that you admire?
4. What is Li-yan’s first reaction when she sees her land? Why does A-ma believe the tea garden is so important? Why does A-ma believe that the trees are sacred? What is the significance of the mother tree?
5. San-pa and Li-yan’s relationship ends tragically and causes them both great pain. Is what happens between them fate, or is it bad luck? In your opinion, does their community’s negativity about their union shape the outcome of their marriage? Does his death change your feelings about him?
6. Can the experience Li-yan’s village has with selling Pu’er be thought of as a microcosm for globalization? Why or why not? Are all the changes to the village positive? Given all we hear about China being a global economic superpower, were you surprised that the novel starts in 1988?
7. As a midwife, A-ma occupies a position of relative power on the mountain, although as “first among women” (page 4), she still comes after every man. Can such a traditional role for women be truly empowering? In the context of their society, what are the limits and expanse of A-ma’s power?
8. This novel uses a number of devices to tell Haley’s story, including letters, a transcript of a therapy session, and homework assignments. It isn’t until the final chapter, however, that you hear Haley in her own pure voice and see the world entirely from her point of view. Did this style of storytelling enrich your experience of the narrative? Did it make you more curious about Haley?
9. In the chapter transcribing a group therapy session for Chinese American adoptees that Haley attends, many of the patients have mixed feelings about their adoptive and birth parents. Were you surprised by their anger? Did reading this novel affect your feelings about transnational adoption?
10. The three most significant mother-daughter relationships in the novel are those between A-ma and Li-yan, Constance and Haley, and Li-yan and Haley. The connection between Li-yan and Haley, although arguably the emotional center of the novel, exists despite the absence of a relationship: though the two women think a great deal about each other, they do not meet until the very end of the story. How does this relationship in absence compare to the real-life relationships between A-ma and Li-yan and Constance and Haley?

11. What are the formal and informal ways in which Li-yan is educated? How are they different from the ways other members of her family were educated? What role does Teacher Zhang play in Li-yan's life and how does it change over the years? How important is education in Haley's life?
12. Li-yan is much older and more experienced when she meets Jin than she was when she fell in love with San-pa. How are the two men different? What do you think Li-yan learns from her first marriage?
13. Almost everyone in the novel has a secret: Li-yan, A-ma, San-pa, Mr. Huang, Deh-ja, Ci-teh, Teacher Zhang, Mrs. Chang, and Jin. How do those secrets impact each character? How are those secrets revealed and what are the results, particularly for Li-yan and Ci-teh's relationship? The only person who doesn't have a secret of major significance is Haley. What does that say about her?
14. When Li-yan returns to her village to confront Ci-teh, the ruma tells the women that Li-yan is still Akha even though she has a new home and lifestyle. How do questions of identity, especially as they relate to Li-yan's status as an ethnic minority, play into the events of the novel? How does Li-yan's identity shift? Do her nicknames, especially her American nickname, inform this shift?
15. By the time Li-yan and Haley meet, each has been searching for the other for many years. However, Haley already has a family and an adoptive mother. Is there room for Haley to have two mothers? How do you think Li-yan and Haley will relate to each other—as mother and child, or will their roles be something slightly different? What do you suppose Haley and Li-yan will talk about first?

- <https://www.litlovers.com/reading-guides/fiction/10932-tea-girl-hummingbird-lane-see?start=3>

## BOOK REVIEWS

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### Booklist

In a remote mountain village, the survival of an Akha tribe, one of China's 55 ethnic minorities, depends on tea. Rigid traditions prohibit Li-yan from keeping her newborn. She saves her daughter by leaving her in a nearby town, wrapped in blankets with a tea cake that hints at her distinctive heritage. Over the course of decades, See (China Dolls, 2014) reveals Li-yan's exceptional story of departure and eventual return. Interspersed with Li-yan's peripatetic experiences are those of her daughter, the titular tea girl, divulged by medical reports, letters, even the transcript of a group therapy session for adopted Chinese teens. See, herself partly of Chinese ancestry, creates a complex narrative that ambitiously includes China's political and economic transformation, little-known cultural history, the intricate challenges of transracial adoption, and an insightful overview of the global implications of specialized teas. The only possible flaw is that some may consider her magic-wand ending unbelievable. As this is her first book since losing her own mother, bestselling author Carolyn See (to whom it is dedicated), See's focus on the unbreakable bonds between mothers and daughters, by birth and by circumstance, becomes an extraordinary homage to unconditional love. HIGH-DEMAND BACKSTORY: Bestselling See's latest will be vigorously promoted on all platforms as she meets readers on a 10-city tour.--Hong, Terry

### Publisher's Weekly

Li-Yan is the youngest daughter of an Ahka family near Nannuo Mountain in China in 1949. She tries to follow Ahka law, the rules set forth by the beliefs of this ethnic minority, but at every turn she seems to find herself doing the

opposite: An Ahka girl must obey and learn from her mother, but Li-Yan studies hard at a modern school. Although an Ahka girl should not speak to men, when foreigners arrive from Hong Kong in search of a renowned, aged tea called Pu'er, Li-Yan is the only one who can translate. If an Ahka girl gets pregnant, she must marry the boy, but when Li-Yan gives birth, the father is gone. And, according to Ahka law, a child born outside of marriage must be killed. But Li-Yan cannot bring herself to do it. Instead, she leaves her daughter at the doorstep of an orphanage. While Li-Yan matures into a successful tea master, the daughter, Haley, is adopted into a white American family in Los Angeles, and her existence is revealed in sporadic letters, school reports, and, later, emails. These sections capture both Haley's desire to fully integrate into her adopted family and her curiosity and heartache about her mother and the only clue she left behind: a tea cake. With vivid and precise details about tea and life in rural China, Li-Yan's gripping journey to find her daughter comes alive. (Mar.)

### Library Journal

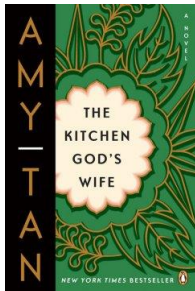
The adage, "No coincidence, no story," from China's Akha minority serves as the backbone for this latest offering from See (Shanghai Girls). Coincidences abound in this illuminating novel that contributes historical and social insight into the Akhas, an animistic people who lived modestly and virtually untouched by modernity in the mountains of China, and tea production in an increasingly globalized world. A growing taste for pu'er, a rare tea, has led entrepreneurs to seek out the ancient crop cultivated in remote Yunnan. Li-Yan, the intelligent but rash daughter of a village midwife, serves as the link between one such entrepreneur and her people, transforming their way of life. Against tradition, she later bears a daughter out of wedlock and gives up the child for adoption at her mother's urging. Banished and broken, Li-Yan tries to navigate modern Chinese life while her daughter is raised by loving Caucasian parents in an upper middle-class California home. Neither time nor distance can vanquish their yearning to be reunited. VERDICT With strong female characters, See deftly confronts the changing role of minority women, majority-minority relations, East-West adoption, and the economy of tea in modern China. Fans of See's *Snow Flower* and *the Secret Fan* will appreciate this novel. [See Prepub Alert, 9/26/16.]-Suzanne Im, Los Angeles P.L.

## Kirkus

A woman from the Akha tribe of China's Yunnan province becomes a tea entrepreneur as her daughter grows up in California. See explores another facet of Chinese culture, one that readers may find obscure but intriguing. Li-Yan, the only daughter of a tea-growing family, is a child of the Akha "ethnic minority," as groups in China who are not of the Han majority are known. The Akha are governed by their beliefs in spirits, cleansing rituals, taboos, and the dictates of village shamans. As a teenager, circa 1988, Li-Yan witnesses the death of newborn twins, killed by their father as custom requires, because the Akha consider twin-ship a birth defect: such infants are branded "human rejects." The Akha, inhabiting rugged, inaccessible terrain, have avoided the full brunt of China's experiments in social engineering, including the Great Leap Forward and its resultant famine, the Cultural Revolution, and the One Child policy. Li-Yan's family harvests mostly from wild tea trees as opposed to terraced bushes, and their product is discovered by a connoisseur, Huang, who will alter Li-Yan's destiny. The Akha encourage youthful sexual experimentation, but progeny outside marriage are automatically "rejects." So when Li-Yan discovers she is pregnant by her absent fiancé, San-pa, she hides, with her mother's help, in the secret grove of ancient tea trees which is her birthright. After the infant is born, Li-Yan journeys on foot to a town where she gives up her child. Over the next 20 years, we follow Li-Yan as she marries and is widowed, escapes her village, becomes a tea seller, and marries a wealthy recycling mogul, Jin. The couple moves to Pasadena. Intermittent dispatches inform readers that, unbeknownst to Li-Yan, her daughter, named Haley by her adoptive parents, is also in Pasadena. Haley's challenges as a privileged American daughter pale in contrast to Li-Yan's far more elemental concerns. Although representing exhaustive research on See's part, and certainly engrossing, the extensive elucidation of international adoption, tea arcana, and Akha lore threatens to overwhelm the human drama. Still, a riveting exercise in fictional anthropology.

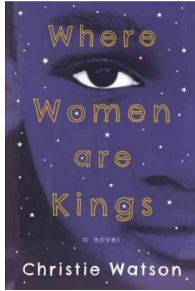
## READALIKES

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### *The Kitchen God's Wife* by Amy Tan

For forty years, in China and in San Francisco, Winnie Louie and Helen Kwong have kept certain confidences. Suddenly, those shattering secrets are about to be revealed. So begins a series of comic misunderstandings and heartbreaking realizations about luck, loss, and trust; about the things a mother cannot tell her daughter, the secrets daughters keep, and the miraculous resiliency of love.



***Where Women Are Kings* by Christie Watson**

After being taken away from his birth mother, seven-year-old Elijah, who is covered in scars, is moved from one foster parent to the next before finding a forever home with Nikki and her husband, Obi, who work tirelessly to help him overcome his tragic past despite many disastrous challenges.



***On Such a Full Sea* by Chang-Rae Lee**

In a class-divided future America where urban neighborhoods function as labor colonies for elite charter villages, Fan, a female fish-tank diver, embarks on what becomes a legendary quest to find the man she loves in a region overcome by anarchic forces.