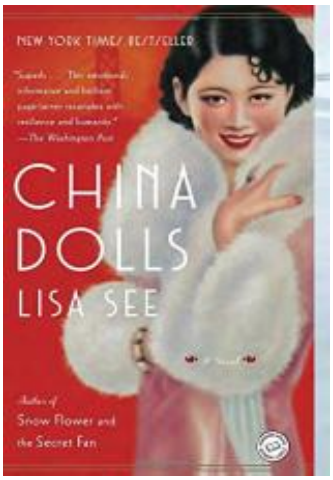
ReadingGroupGuides
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China Dolls

by Lisa See



About the Book

It?s 1938 in San Francisco: A world?s fair is preparing to open on Treasure Island, a war is brewing overseas, and the city is alive with possibilities. Grace, Helen and Ruby, three young women from very different backgrounds, meet by chance at the exclusive and glamorous Forbidden City nightclub. Grace Lee, an American-born Chinese girl, has fled the Midwest with nothing but heartache, talent and a pair of dancing shoes. Helen Fong lives with her extended family in Chinatown, where her traditional parents insist that she guard her reputation like a piece of jade. The stunning Ruby Tom challenges the boundaries of convention at every turn with her defiant attitude and no-holds-barred ambition.

The girls become fast friends, relying on one another through unexpected challenges and shifting fortunes. When their dark secrets are exposed and the invisible thread of fate binds them even tighter, they find the strength and resilience to reach for their dreams. But after the Japanese attack Pearl Harbor, paranoia and suspicion threaten to destroy their lives, and a shocking act of betrayal changes everything.

Discussion Guide

1. The novel opens with the below quotation:

> *?Only three things cannot be long hidden:*
> *the sun*
> *the moon*
> *and the truth.?*

What does this quotation mean in the context of CHINA DOLLS? Lisa?s novel is filled with secrets --- some hidden and not revealed until late in the novel. What were the most important ones? Why are they hidden? Why are they secrets? Do you agree with how and when they were revealed?

2. ?In just these few minutes I?d learned two things about myself: I would never lower myself by faking an accent like my dad did (or Charlie Chan did in the movies), nor would I work naked as a hoochie-coochie dancer. All right, so I had pride. But what price would I have to pay for it?? (p. 11). This is something Grace realized about herself when she just started out as a performer. How did her outlook evolve throughout the novel?

3. Grace?s father brutally abused her when she was a young girl. Although Lisa never excused his behavior, how did she gradually reveal to the reader some of the factors that made him the man he was? Did you ever accept him for who he was? In what ways did the abuse Grace suffer at the hands of her father shape her subsequent relationships with men?

4. How did your perception of Ruby shift throughout the story? Did the hardship and discrimination she experienced affect the rest of her actions, whether commendable or not? How did Ruby?s ambition differ from that of Grace?s?

5. Ruby could have had any man she wanted?and she often did. Is it fair to be critical of the way Ruby tried to hide her early relationship with Joe from Grace? Why did she choose Joe, especially in light of Grace?s crush on him? Was this betrayal ultimately helpful to Grace in some respects?

6. How did you react to the way Ruby hid her Japanese ancestry as World War II began? How did you feel about her relationship with her parents? Did you think Ruby?s parents were Japanese spies? Could you tell one way or another? Did it matter to you whether they were verifiably innocent or guilty?

7. Helen?s narratives were filled with traditional Chinese sayings. Which are the most important in the novel and why? What aspects of Helen?s life made her situation fundamentally different from that of the other girls? When Helen?s past was revealed, were you surprised? How did it affect her approach to friendship?

8. Helen?s and Grace?s fathers share many similarities in how they look at their daughters and women. In what ways do their personal backgrounds make the two men different from each other?

9. What important elements did Eddie bring to the novel? Would you have married Eddie if you had been in Helen?s situation?

10. Ruby says to Grace, ?You want an American life. I want an American life. Even Helen wants an American life? and then thinks to herself ?And all of us, in our own ways, were doing the best we could to erase who we were? (p. 301). What do you think an ?American life? meant for each woman, and why did they have to erase themselves to achieve it? Who were you rooting for most in the novel --- Grace, Helen or Ruby? And why?

11. Did you think Grace?s relationship with Joe was significantly different after the war? If so, how? In what ways had Grace changed? Joe? In reality, could they have changed as much as they did in the novel?

12. How was Helen?s betrayal of Ruby different from her betrayal of Grace? Which betrayal was worse? Why? Would the final confrontation scene have been different if it had been entirely narrated by Grace? Or by Helen?

13. While there are big betrayals in the novel, there were also moments of great resiliency and hope as the girls helped each other. In what ways did Grace, Helen, and Ruby support one another?

14. Perhaps more than in any of her other novels, Lisa has written in great detail about clothes and fashion. Why do you think she did that and what was she trying to say?

15. ?China doll? or ?China dolls? are phrases used often in the novel. What are the most important meanings behind this phrase? Which are positive? Which are negative? At the end of CHINA DOLLS, Tommy?s daughter criticized Grace?s career as one that promoted racial stereotypes. Was that criticism fair? Why or why not?

Author Bio

Lisa See is the *New York Times* bestselling author of DAUGHTERS OF THE SUN AND MOON, LADY TAN'S CIRCLE OF WOMEN, THE ISLAND OF SEA WOMEN, 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. 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.

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Critical Praise

?Superb?This emotional, informative and brilliant page-turner resonates with resilience and humanity.?

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