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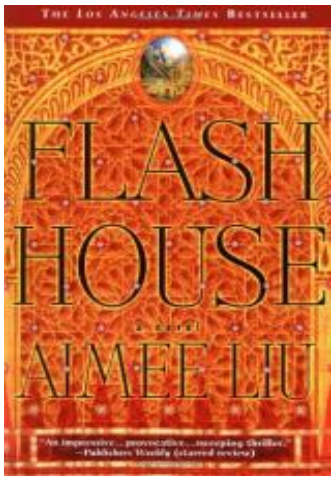
# Flash House

by Aimee E. Liu




## About the Book

"I was merely one of countless children of the red-light district. I owned nothing, not even my skin, but I knew why this foreign lady had come. The whole street knew. Tongas turned left instead of right at the sight of her. Khas-khas tati dropped over open windows. Smugglers bundled up their wares and trotted out of view. Women drew scarves across their faces and the street became suddenly lively with dancing bears, monkey wallahs, and paan vendors. All for the benefit of the foreigner who would come to save us..."
-from **Flash House**

"Joanna Shaw rescued me, in her way,
and I tried to return the favor."

New Delhi, 1949. Joanna Shaw runs a refuge for girls from the city's red-light district. She is here when the news arrives: her husband's plane has gone down in the mountains of Kashmir. Certain that Aidan, a journalist, is still alive, she enlists the aid of his best friend, Lawrence. Together with ten-year-old Kamla, the half Chinese, half Sikh orphan she has rescued from a brothel, the three begin a journey into the treacherous heart of the Himalayas, where Aidan seems to have vanished without a trace.

For Joanna, it is a search for the truth about the husband she thought she knew. For Lawrence, it is a quest for redemption. And for the turquoise-eyed Kamla, it is an odyssey into the tantalizing mystery of her birth. Masterfully weaving the story of these three extraordinary people into the chaos and confusion of the years following World War II, Aimee Liu gives us a multilayered and richly textured tale that evokes echoes of Graham Greene's classic novels and Anita Shreve's **The Pilot's Wife**. Part love story and part gripping political thriller, **Flash House** is about surviving against impossible odds in a world where nothing is what it seems?and the ultimate safe haven is the elusive place called home.

## Discussion Guide

**1.** In the opening pages, Kamla states that "Joanna Shaw rescued me in her way, and I tried to return the favor." How and why did Joanna need to be "rescued," or was that need only in Kamla's mind? Was Kamla successful in her attempt to return the favor?

**2.** Joanna Shaw is a social worker who attempts to rescue girls who've been trafficked into India's sex trade. What does her chosen profession reveal about her character? Why is this important within the overall story?

**3.** "Flash house" is a Victorian term for brothel-or house of prostitution. Kamla escapes from just such a house, but how does the metaphor of the "flash house" reflect other aspects of the novel?

**4.** Early in the novel, Joanna Shaw's boss, Hari, lectures her about the horrors India suffered during Partition. "I try to remember what a short time you have been in India," he tells her, "you have no idea what is rape . . ." Is this meant as an indictment of American naiveté, or as a plea for help? How does Joanna's relative unfamiliarity with Asia's recent history affect her choice to pursue Aidan?

**5.** Throughout this novel the characters make reference to the Great Game, the historical rivalry between Britain and Russia for control of the northern access routes to the Indian subcontinent. Why and how is the Great Game relevant to the political intrigues that engulf Joanna, Aidan, Kamla, and Lawrence in Sinkiang? Are there parallels you can draw between the Great Game and world political events today?

**6.** All four of the main characters-Joanna, Lawrence, Simon, and Kamla-live outside their native states and cultures. They are, in effect, stateless, so that this becomes a story about the expatriate experience. In what ways is this a shared experience for all four characters? How and why is this experience different for each of them? How does their mutual statelessness impact their choices and interactions?

**7.** Absence is a critical theme throughout this story. Aidan's absence drives Joanna's actions through much of the novel. Kamla and Simon both are marked by parental absence. Lawrence mourns the loss of his son. What are the effects of absence on the emotions and behavior of the characters?

**8.** Although the novel is told through alternating chapters in three different voices, the story is bookended by sections written from Kamla's point of view as an elderly woman. How does this perspective shape the overall story? Why do you think the author selected Kamla rather than Joanna as the primary narrator?

**9.** Aimee Liu has said that her earliest drafts of **Flash House** were written from the perspective of Simon as a grown man. Why do you think she abandoned this approach? How would it have altered the story for you if Simon had been telling the tale?

**10.** What questions does the story raise about the impulse to rescue? Is rescue, as described in the story, intrinsically moral, emotional, or pragmatic? What links does the story suggest between acts of rescue and acts of love?

**11.** In the epilogue Kamla states, "What mattered most in the end was not right or wrong. It was not politics or fidelity or even understanding. Certainly it was not the act of rescue. It was simply our mutual ineptitude at love." Is Kamla a

reliable narrator? What does she mean by "our mutual ineptitude at love"?

## Author Bio

My past lives include early childhood in India; middle childhood, adolescence, and anorexia in the Connecticut suburbs of New York City; three years of teenage modeling through the Wihelmina agency; a major in painting at Yale University followed by turns as a waitress in New York and a flight attendant with United Airlines. Between flights I wrote my first book, Solitaire, a chronicle of my passage through anorexia, which was published in 1979, when I was twenty-five.

That same year I made a family journey to China, my father's birthplace, and on the Great Wall I met my future husband. Within three months I'd moved from Manhattan to Los Angeles to be with him. Over the next ten years I worked as editor on two business journals and as an associate producer for NBC Today's medical segments, co-authored seven books on medical and psychological topics, raised two sons, and waited for the inspiration that would propel me to write my first novel.

Inspiration arrived in the form of the Tiananmen Massacre in Beijing in 1989. My feelings of identification with the students in the square that spring forced me to examine my attitudes as a woman of mixed race. Though my first novel **Face** published by Warner in 1984, describes a wholly fictional family, it reflects this process of examination. It also prompted me to question my family more closely about my father's childhood in China and about the marriage between my American grandmother and Chinese grandfather. The result of that inquiry was Cloud Mountain published by Warner in 1998.

## Critical Praise

"Memorable?keeps us guessing?Liu has an eye for scenery and a feel for the details of period life in India."

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**Flash House**
by Aimee E. Liu

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