

Empire of Glass

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Empire of Glass is a study in contrasts and a provocative labyrinth.

Empire of Glass is the visceral tale of an American exchange student, Lao K, who is entrusted with her Chinese host mother Li-Ming's notebook after her death. Lao K's translation—which comprises the novel being read—details life in communist Beijing. Kaitlin Somiline's lingering plot is a brilliant exploration of self-perception, changing identities, love, and idealism. Through Li-Ming's letters, fragments of classical Chinese poetry, and an increasingly unreliable account of the past, characters reveal how “we write ourselves into being with the pen of our actions, the ink of our thoughts.”

Li-Ming's work begins in girlhood and alternates with the story of her husband, Wang. Each is influenced by peers: Li-Ming by a friend who seeks refuge from a harsh regime through literature, and Wang by his comrades in the People's Volunteer Army. A rich retelling combs through incidents whose edges are rounded by time, such that it becomes possible for a soldier's assault on a prisoner to be mistaken for love. Lao K's footnotes build suspense. Her account of scouting locations and gathering the means to assist Li-Ming in her suicide are especially disturbing; she seldom seems to question her complicity. As the stories run parallel, memory's malleable nature takes center stage.

Painstaking scenes build fascinating backgrounds for the main characters. Wang's upbringing as the son of an eyeglass lens grinder provide glimpses of an enterprising family. Li-Ming's journey as one of many sent-down youths during China's mid-century reveals her tenacity. As much as the novel focuses on Li-Ming—through her own words and through Lao K's observations—it's Lao K who assumes a larger role in later chapters. Sometimes as close as a daughter, at other times an interloper with a dark past of her own, she's an elusive narrator who embeds herself in her host family's lives.

Somiline—a Fulbright scholar and once a resident in China—brings plentiful experience to this study in contrasts. Between urban and rural settings, characters who quote Mao and those who inwardly resist him, literary passages that mirror or mask emotions, *Empire of Glass* is a provocative labyrinth.

KAREN RIGBY (July/August 2017)

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