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Foreign Teachers

Sam Wade
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Foreign Teachers *is a resonant novel about an East-West culture clash, seen through the eyes of a crude expat.*

Sam Wade's satirical novel *Foreign Teachers* peeks under the veneer of the private schools attended by contemporary China's nouveau riche. Told from the perspective of an increasingly disillusioned American teacher, it reveals the fault lines of a bureaucratized, unfair divide between Chinese and Western teachers in a place where nothing is ever as it first seems.

The narrator, Andy, has worked for years at an elite school in the gated Luxury Gardens community on the outskirts of Guangzhou. He initially sought an overseas teaching job to avoid the low pay and grind of the jobs available back home. He has neither an education degree nor certification, but as a Westerner, he had prestige and cachet enough to land a cushy job as an English teacher at this Chinese school. He and the other privileged, imported instructors are paid more, work less, and seem immune to discipline and the "swift and severe" punishments threatened by bombastic school administrators.

Despite these extra privileges, Andy is lonely and filled with self-doubt. He suffers from unrequited love. His closest buddies have started families, and they don't share his hard-partying lifestyle as they once did. When a new, idealistic American teacher, Glenn, joins the staff and becomes the darling of pupils and administrators alike, Andy is further mired in his malaise.

Textured with a blend of melancholy and humor, the novel focuses on its singular setting and eccentric cast. Its prose is uneven, though. It sometimes reads as a lively academic satire, as when Andy and a foul-mouthed colleague mock the ridiculous puffery of the school principal and his underlings, who are intent on securing a coveted International Diploma Organization approval. But it also indulges in long, sad descriptions of Andy's extended sojourns in the red light districts of China, Thailand, and the Philippines.

At its best, the novel is uproarious, with keen dialogue, canned doublespeak, and observations of bad translations on store signs and restaurant menus (Andy dines on Bacteria and Grass and Heavenly Odor Rice at one meal). But its characters are flat throughout—including dimensionless Andy. Glenn acts in surprising ways, but his motivations aren't a strong feature until the end of the tale; he's an enigmatic personality for too much of the book. How the men spend their holidays is used to suggest that they're opposites: Andy binge drinks and pursues women, while Glenn checks out pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong, earning Andy's admiration. Meanwhile, contrasting descriptions of life inside and outside of the Luxury Gardens gates are insightful and evocative. The book's account of a baijiu-soaked, fake-cheery teacher outing is most memorable.

Foreign Teachers is a resonant novel about an East-West culture clash, seen through the eyes of a crude expat who has flashes of wit and insight.

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RACHEL JAGARESKI (September 2, 2021)

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