

Hard Sleeper: A Novel of Old and New China

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In 1936, on an inauspicious night in Peking, two American Christian missionaries are mysteriously beheaded in their own home. Two years later, their orphaned daughter, Jane, gives birth to a half-Asian baby, a daughter she will spend a lifetime trying to find. On a thirty-four hour train ride in a hard sleeper—a class of train berth in which passengers sleep on hard bunks—from Chengdu to Beijing, Jane reluctantly tells her story to Pippa, a twenty-something documentary filmmaker on the hunt for a good story. As the novel unfolds, the intricacies of various relationships—Chinese and American, mothers and daughters, masters and servants—add to the richness of this engaging tale.

Jane McPherson's youth had been an idyll. Born in Peking, she speaks both English and Mandarin fluently. In her fifteenth year, her best friend, Li Han, her constant playmate and guide, runs away to join the communists and Jane is left alone. Things are also changing for her handsome older brother, Will—during a visit to Shanghai with close family friends, the Baumans, he goes to a brothel, infuriating his parents. The resulting family turmoil mars Jane's happy world. All the while, the Japanese continue to encroach on China day by day, and the Kuomintang government does little to stop them. Over and over, people tell Jane, "You've been living in a dream world. Nothing stays the same."

After the murders, Will and Jane go to Shanghai to live with the Baumans and discover a city entirely different than Peking. With its international community, European shops, and decadent nightclubs, Shanghai is the jewel of China's crown—a jewel desired by the Japanese. As impending war becomes unavoidable, Will tries to find the reasons behind his parents' deaths, and Jane tries to fill the hole in her heart from the loss of her parents, Han, and her Peking childhood. As the present-day Jane says, "The tragedy and horror brought me the greatest blessing of my life."

Szymanski and Bushman, who studied Chinese history and traveled extensively in China, have written a page-turner. They do a fine job of extending the suspense of Jane's story. Told in alternating chapters from the past and the present, the story repeats some facts and ideas unnecessarily. Overall, however, this mother and daughter writing team have done a good job of capturing the dense complexities of China's history and weaving them into their tale. Szymanski, the mother of this team and a Foreign Service officer who served in Beijing, died of breast cancer in 1998. A portion of the book's sales will go to cancer-prevention research.

OLIVIA BOLER (July / August 2003)

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