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Foreword Review GENERAL FICTION

Repeat After Me

Rachel DeWoskin
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The “me” of this time-traveling valentine to China is Aysha Silvermintz. Twenty-two a native New Yorker her degree in English literature at Columbia University still incomplete owing to a manic interlude in St. Lukes psych ward Aysha is rebuilding her life by teaching English as a second language. Its September 1989 that golden age of political naivet. The Tiananmen Square student protest in Beijing of last June seems as insubstantial as a butterflys fluttering wings. It seems impossible that it will produce a tidal wave that will engulf her life in New York City. Enter Da Ge tardy to the English class by two weeks and fifteen minutes surly scrawny dangerously fluent in broken English and carrying an irresistible whiff of insubordination. His homework essays are family snapshots of Chinas repressive past. They will propel a plotline that leads Aysha and her fatherless daughter to expatriate themselves in China in 2003.

The authors fluid style and eye for graceful detail renders each lovers perspective with a poetic grace. The contretemps in Chinatown has both a sweet and shadowy touch; Da Ges stigmata (his mothers suicide his fathers shameless market profiteering) gives a specific gravity to Ayshas ironically clueless family history. But this confident command of local color both in New York and China comes at a high price.

This is DeWoskins second novel. Educated at Columbia she threw over a promising career in public relations in Beijing to assume a starring role in a successful Chinese soap opera. Her first novels sales in five languages and subsequent development into a feature film may have as much to do with her humor as with her tolerance for sentimental melodrama.

Aysha moves through her enlightenment in China wearing an optimistic Made-in-America heart on her sleeve. The political and personal stain of human loss and the novels double suicides are not so easily shoehorned into submission. The final chapters are a briskly assembled collection of Magic Kingdom snapshots: beaming Chinese and Jewish grandparents a precociously lively and loving daughter who makes a scrapbook of Da Ges sainted childhood and the widowed Aysha now teaching English literature to Chinese students in Beijing. That shiny gloss of American belief in fairy tales shines through.

LEETA TAYLOR (April 13, 2009)

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