



The Charm Buyers

Lillian Howan

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The Charm Buyers, by Lillian Howan, is a novel about family drama and expectation, cultural assimilation, and the mystical sense of ancient ideas that center around Tahiti. This is an evocative novel of loss and acceptance that tells a startlingly emotional journey through the eyes of an apathetic narrator.

The narrator, Marc, recounts his childhood learning the stories and beliefs of his ancient Hakka culture contrasted with his modernized father, the head of a wealthy pearl empire. Marc falls in love with his cousin, Marie-Laure, and begins a long affair with Aurore du Chatelet, a painter and woman of power. He bands together with his cousin Radish to start a career in smuggling. This grows for years until Marc is rich from smuggling everything from drugs to reptiles. His life stalls when Marie-Laure returns to Tahiti; she has what is hinted to be a nuclear test-related disease. Drawing from the stories that he learned from his great-grandmother, Marc is offered a meeting with a shaman and trades his good fortune for Marie-Laure's health. As the story progresses both Marc and the reader must decide whether such old-world magic is real or everything in life is merely the product of a series of coincidences.

Howan's language is breathtaking, building a land and family with detail and power. The novel is full of characters, all related to one another in various ways, yet each person stands out for a different reason. Everyone feels real, and the conversations and other interactions between the characters are lifelike and believable. While the plot remains slow, jerking from moment to moment, this adds an effective dreamlike quality to the book. The language and the setting are powerfully felt from beginning to end.

The Charm Buyers is a thought-provoking insight into a time of cultural change. It captures an essence of existing between reality and surreality, dreaming and wakefulness, the past and the future. This is a book for anyone intrigued by spiritualism and about the pressure to live true to one's belief without causing disappointment to the family.

SHANA CREANEY (March/April 2017)

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