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The Oriental Wife

Evelyn Toynton
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This intriguing novel, set against the backdrop of pre- and post-World War II, centers around two German Jewish immigrants. Louisa, Rolf, and Rolf's cousin Otto were childhood friends in Germany. A variety of circumstances lands the three of them in New York while their homeland and much of Europe prepares for war.

Louisa is vivacious, charming, and confident—everything that the taciturn and socially awkward Rolf is not. Nonetheless, the two fall in love, marry, and have a daughter, Emma. But their marriage is tested when a doctor's mishap changes the course of all their lives. Louisa is suddenly "deformed" and loses not only the use of a body part but her spark for life.

Rolf falls out of love with his wife because he can't see beyond her physical handicap. His confused feelings for her following the accident and his decisions concerning her welfare, along with the author's introduction of a number of colorful supporting characters—including the family's feisty nanny, Louisa's morose mother, and the scheming Connie, Rolf's second wife—make for an absorbing reading experience.

Luck and twists of fate are central themes in this hard-to-put-down story. As one of the characters observes, "If we knew when we were born what lay in store for us, none of us would have the courage to see it through."

Heartbreaking and poignant, the book also explores the disintegration of a marriage, a family, and a dream. From Rolf's perspective: "In the past few months America had seemed lost to him for good; he'd been thrust back into the Old World again, with all its weight of senseless suffering, and this time he was helpless: there were no visas to apply for, no forms to fill out that would restore Louisa to what she had been. He only knew that what had happened could never be part of an American life."

Another theme is isolation and regret, and how our choices have a ripple effect on the rest of our lives. As the author eloquently says, again through Rolf's voice: "He saw that some failures, some cruelties, were irrevocable; some harm could never be undone. That he was nothing like the man he'd thought himself to be. That he would carry this knowledge for the rest of his life."

Journalist Evelyn Toynton is also the author of *Modern Art,* a novel about the widow of Jackson Pollock.
HILARY DANINHIRSCH (June 29, 2011)

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