

The Secret Language of Women

Nina Romano

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A stunning look at China at the turn of the twentieth century, this is a love story that crosses boundaries both cultural and geographic.

In Nina Romano's *The Secret Language of Women*, two lovers torn apart by war and culture struggle to reunite against all odds. Despite their determination, fate continues to thwart their efforts, driving home how ephemeral and bittersweet finding true love can be.

Set against the backdrop of late nineteenth-century China, *The Secret Language of Women* opens with Zhou Bin Lian, the biracial daughter of a Chinese woman and a Swiss doctor. Although she dreams of following in her father's footsteps, her gender presents a significant hurdle. Even so, Lian assists her father, hoping that she can rise above these sociocultural constraints. This leads her to the palace of the dowager empress, where she meets and falls in love with an Italian sailor named Giacomo Scimenti. Circumstances cut their passionate affair short, but in the years to follow, Lian and Giacomo continue to search for each other, even as their separate lives take them across land and sea.

Lian and Giacomo's adventures, both separate and together, provide a stunning look at China at the turn of the twentieth century. The cultural strife presented by the Boxer Rebellion mirrors the conflict caused by Lian's dual heritage. She yearns to become a fully fledged healer while striving to be a proper Chinese wife who honors her selected husband and his family despite her heart belonging to someone else.

A drawn-out series of near misses and crossed paths characterize Lian and Giacomo's travels. Although their time together proved brief, their initial infatuation blossoms into an intense, unforgettable love that carries them through many trials and travails. Lian's efforts to find happiness do not come without a price, and this sometimes raises the question of whether the struggle is worth it.

From lush summer palaces to modest countryside farms, *The Secret Language of Women* demonstrates how love can cross cultural and geographical borders. It proves how love at first sight need not be an impossibility and can form a foundation to carry its recipients through times both good and ill.

VERNIEDA VERGARA (Winter 2016)

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