

Two Tales of the Moon

Jennifer Sun

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Two Tales of the Moon is a thoughtful portrait of a modern woman who must choose between the burden of memory and a future of her own making.

In *Two Tales of the Moon*, forty-seven-year-old Li Lu confronts the damage China's Cultural Revolution inflicted on her family. Former executive and author Jennifer Sun melds the high-stakes world of acquisitions and mergers with loss and newfound romance. The novel examines themes of secrecy and change, using two versions of a Chinese fable—in which a moon fairy exiles herself—as a guiding framework.

The plot alternates between Li Lu, head of an equity-investment research team based in New York; her childhood friend, Sage; Sage's brother, Will, whose Washington, DC, business is at a crossroads; and Li Lu's mother in Shanghai, Xing Lin. Early chapters examine the logistics of Li Lu's and Will's work, as well as their backgrounds. Key information is frequently conveyed through tableside discussions and flashbacks, an approach that prevents characters from appearing in a dynamic light. A tendency to repeat basic facts—such as the revenue and success of Will's business—and to dwell on apartment interiors slows the pacing.

The story gathers momentum midway through, when Li Lu arrives in Shanghai on assignment. Once back in her homeland, Li Lu seeks her estranged mother. In these sections, panoramic views and well-placed details bring the polluted city alive. Layers of history appear beneath the rapidly modernizing highways and buildings. One of the most effective, extended scenes features Xing Lin. With ceremonial gestures, she prepares for a move from an art deco apartment that has been slated for demolition. Here, the writing takes on the sharpened focus of a play; objects in the room serve as touchstones for memories that add depth to Li Lu's story.

One of the book's highly anticipated moments featuring Xing Lin, however, occurs offstage. It is recounted later, through Li Lu's conversation with Sage, and is one of several instances in which dialogue substitutes for scenes rich with potential. The book's revelations about Li Lu's mother are also made in a sudden speech, which make them seem incidental. Still, the work effectively captures the effects of communism in searingly personal ways.

Of the characters, Li Lu and her mother stand out. More than the complexities of Will's business and the pending deal that has caused their paths to converge, it is Li Lu's strength and Xing Lin's complicated, critical, privileged personality that enliven the work. *Two Tales of the Moon* is a thoughtful portrait of a modern woman who must choose between the burden of memory and a future of her own making.

KAREN RIGBY (December 3, 2015)

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