



Under the Pong Pong Tree

Hal Levey

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Under the Pong Pong Tree is a powerful examination of the long-term and immediate atrocities of war.

The Japanese invasion of Singapore sets the backdrop for this World War II saga of loyalty, love, and the promise of liberation. *Under the Pong Pong Tree* by Hal Levey delves into the brutality of foreign occupation from a woman's perspective, allowing a candid portrayal of a war victim to emerge from the pages of this gritty chronicle.

Li Lian Goh enters a military brothel to serve Japanese soldiers after she is forcibly separated from her family. A client impregnates her, so she leaves for a Malayan village to protect herself and her unborn baby. It is this child, named Maimunah, who steps forward during the Vietnam War to become the novel's second heroine. Her relationship with Captain Mike Cagle, an American fighter pilot, takes center stage, adding a bit of adventure and romance to the plot.

Levey draws connections between past and present events through the use of drama and experience. Dynamic characters drive the story forward. The prose is sensitive, knowledgeable, and empathetic, covering intriguing topics across an extensive time line.

Steeped in suffering, Levey's well-drawn characters depict the horror of territorial disputes and the aftermath of sexual abuse. Post-traumatic stress coupled with lack of autonomy lead to a dismal existence in this straightforward narrative. Li Lian, in particular, brings to life with considerable impact the torment that so many Asian women endured during these tumultuous periods.

In one particularly potent scene, Li Lian succumbs to the only peace she has ever known: "She heated the tiny nugget until fumes rose, and it started to melt. Then she wound the opium onto a bamboo splint and forced it into the pipe bowl. Inhaling deeply, she closed her eyes and sank back into the silk pillows on her divan, holding the vapors in her lungs as she awaited the sweet lassitude."

Though the novel focuses on a tainted historical reality, it still manages to convey hope. The American captain plays a crucial role in preventing a heartbreaking situation from turning into a classic tragedy. His affection for Maimunah increases the prospects for a positive outcome, elevating the mood of this dark journey from hell, and guiding the characters to a calm place of redemption.

Under the Pong Pong Tree powerfully examines the long-term and immediate atrocities of war, humanizing the wartime experiences by providing frank and unpleasant details.

JULIA ANN CHARPENTIER (January 15, 2016)

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