On Gold Mountain: The 100-Year Odyssey of a Chinese-American Family by Lisa See

Well Written Biography, Complex Story, Well Researched

Lisa See, daughter of novelist Carolyn See, brings a novelist's skill to this sprawling ancestral history. Books tracing the roots of overseas Chinese writers are not uncommon these days, but See uncovered in her family tree a capsule history of the Sino-American diaspora: her great-grandfather, Fong See, founded a California business, married a Caucasian woman and fathered many offspring, and returned periodically to China to redistribute some of his wealth and launch another family.

See, a Publishers Weekly writer, has conducted extensive interviews and drawn on family lore for an enthralling saga of ambition, prejudice, love, loyalty, and sorrow--social history at its best.

My Personal Review:
I must admit that I was a little (all right, very) skeptical when I first saw this book several years ago. I resisted buying or reading it only because I didn't believe that a part-Chinese (1/8 to be precise) American could do a good job in telling the story of the Chinese-American experience. In many ways, I was stereotyping the idea of what Chinese-American is. I was thinking of a Chinese-American as one who is ethnically 100% Chinese but is culturally American and that would preclude someone like See. Well, I was wrong. This author, Lisa See, convinced me that her family story is truly a Chinese-American one. No, let me rephrase, her story is an American one. Now that I've read and enjoyed the book, I am especially surprised, pleasantly, at how honest and real her portrayal of the characters are. I know these are real people and the stories are real but to me their stories read like fairy tales an so they become characters. Their stories are so unusual that had See not done such a good job in writing it, they would have been unbelievable.

One of the reasons that it is a really good book is the way the author presented the facts -- with stories and photographs. It is a well documented, well researched, and well written book.
I could also attest to the veracities of the historical events and personal dramas that were described in the book because my own family's history had very many of the same events, trials and tribulations are similar to hers. And since I do read and speak Chinese and I am knowledgeable about the customs of the Southern China district where her great-grandfather came from, I can also say that her description of the cultures (including family practices, language, etc...) are extremely accurate. And they are accurate not to the point of patronizing or insulting, but straightforward in the way it happened. This style of writing I admired enormously. I think Ms. See did a great service not only to her own family, but to the Chinese-American experience as well. This book really does serve as a documentary to all of the Chinese American immigrants who had come to the country in the last 100 years or more. It is a record of history. It can probably be used as text book for a history class. The book is well written in many ways. One of the way is that is very personal and yet readable, even for people not from her family. It is about people, culture, history, family, love, triumph, politics, business, relations, and much more. I highly recommend it.

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