

BOOK REVIEW

A Fabulous World Turned Upside Down

By Paula Bock

Shanghai Girls by Lisa See

Random House, 314 pp., \$25

In Lisa See's latest novel, "Shanghai Girls," 21-year-old Pearl Chin and her younger sister May live a sweet, spoiled life. Their father's rickshaw business is so profitable his daughters have sumptuous silk cheongsams tailored nearly every week; the young women are so pretty, they model for artists who paint their likenesses on "Beautiful Girl" calendars and advertisements; their playground is Shanghai, the "Paris of Asia" in 1937.

But by chapter two, their beautiful world literally explodes. Their father's business fails; he settles bad gambling debts by promising his daughters to two brothers in "arranged" marriages; their future father-in-law raids their closet — shipping their favorite cheongsams to America, where the sisters are supposed to join their new husbands; Japanese troops are closing in on their cosmopolitan city.

What's a girl to do? Go shopping!

May and Pearl head to fashionable Nanking Road, vaguely noticing the thousands of poor peasants who have fled the Japanese invasion of the country-side. "May and I stroll ... avoiding the refugees and eyeing Shanghainese and Shanghailanders to see what they're wearing. Outside Cathay Hotel we run into Tommy Hu.

He wears a white duck suit and straw hat tilted back on his head. He seems thrilled to see May, and she melts into her flirtatious mode."

Then four bombs fall, maiming and killing thousands. Pearl loses sight of May in the chaos. Frantic, she stumbles over sidewalks "slippery with clotted blood and flesh ... and then,

amid all the ... gore, I see through the crowd a patch of robin's egg blue with a white plum blossom pattern," the gorgeous fabric of May's cheongsam.

Her sister is injured, but alive.

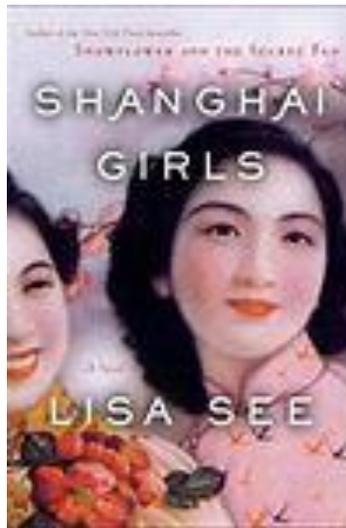
From there, the best-selling novelist's fast-moving plot takes readers from glamorous Shanghai to the louse-infested Hong Kong waterfront to Los Angeles Chinatown's tacky-tacky souvenir shops and greasy cafes.

The sisters flee Chinese gangsters and Japanese soldiers, sail across the Pacific (second-class) to San Francisco, and outwit cruel immigration officials on Angel

Island, an interrogation center that's the sadistic West Coast cousin of Ellis Island. After settling with in-laws in the lesser of Los Angeles' two Chinatowns, they wrestle with poverty, boredom, depression, stifling Chinese traditions, Communist witch hunts, racism and a despotic father-in-law who constantly pressures them for a grandson.

Kudos to See for her exhaustive research. She used historical records of immigration interviews on Angel Island, verbatim, to create the scenes where Pearl and May parry with officials. And she highlights the deplorable and often overlooked treatment of Chinese Americans during the McCarthy era.

Occasionally, See's characters seem burdened with the task of delivering the author's painstaking research. Spunky May and Pearl are always likable but not always believable. Pearl narrates events skillfully, but her limited



emotional range doesn't allow her the full-fleshed complexity she deserves.

Still, it's refreshing to view this era through women's eyes and be privy to delightful conversations like this: "If your nipples are small like the seeds of a lotus ... then your son will rise in society. If your nipples are the size of dates then your son will sink into poverty."

Fair warning: *Shanghai Girls* ends on a cliffhanger for which See might be forgiven if the promised sequel is as good.

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Paula Bock is a journalist who cares deeply about women and children in need Her reporting for the Seattle Times has taken her to Thailand, Burma (Myanmar), Cambodia, Nepal, Zimbabwe, Canada, Norway, Italy, and Switzerland where she's written about everything from human trafficking to child lamas.

Paula's stories have earned the Ernie Pyle National Writing Award for depicting the human condition and awards for international and investigative reporting, coverage of global health, social issues, disabilities, travel the arts, fashion, science, the environment and education. Paula grew up in Connecticut, graduated from Harvard University and studied in Taipei as an International Rotary Fellow.

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