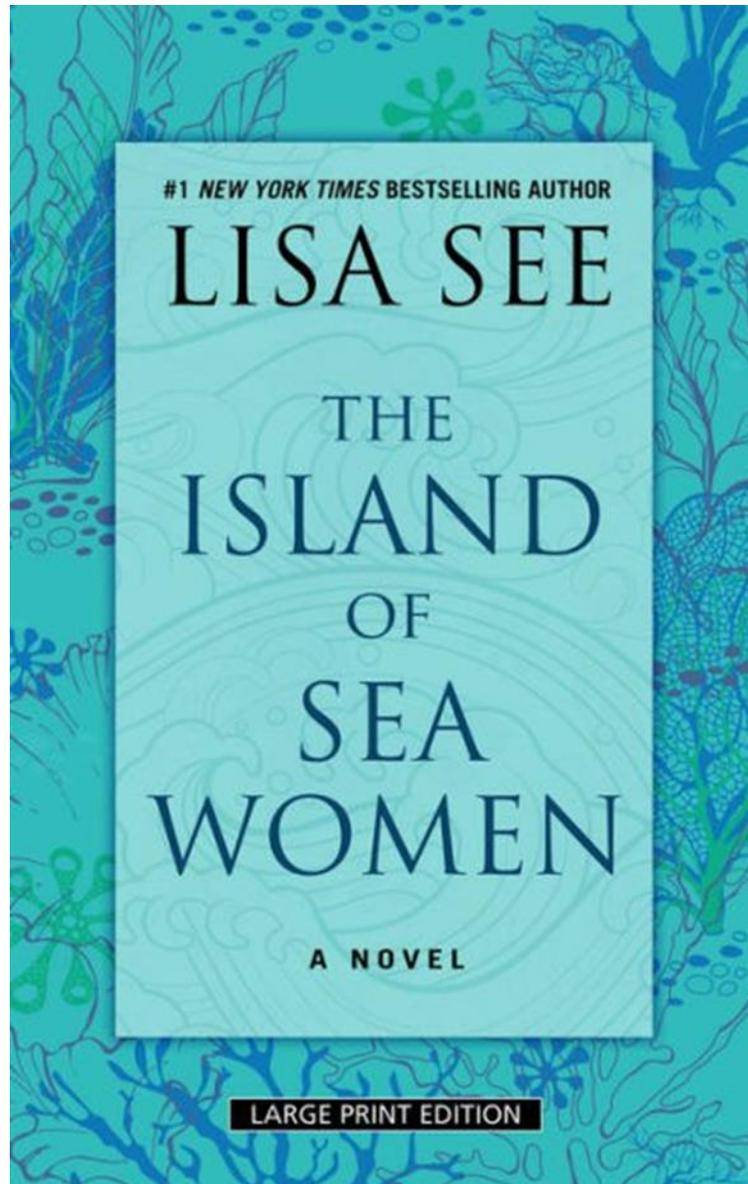


BOOK REPORT

The Island of Sea Women



The Community of Sea Divers

Best-selling American novelist Lisa See, a writer of Chinese ancestry, has chosen a unique society through which to weave the story in her new book, *The Island of Sea Women*. This is a society where the women engage in all the dangerous physical work and the men take care

of the home and children. The women and their families live in villages along the coast of Jeju, an island bordering the southern coast of Korea. This unique societal structure has existed there for many decades.

Jeju Island is today considered a tourist destination because of its many hotels, lush plant life, and historically designated buildings. Few of the visitors, however, are aware of the fact that the female divers on the island go out each day to gather shell fish, abalone, octopuses, and other edible creatures from the underwater banks that surround the island. Each village of female divers has its assigned sea space in which to gather the food, and each village has its collective team and leader.

The main character in this story is Young-sook, whose mother is a team leader. Youngsook's closest friend is Mi-ja with whom she dives each day. In fact, the two of them learn the diving work together and remain close friends through almost every adversity, such as surviving an attack by a large octopus.

The author provides many details about the diving process including how the divers develop their lungs so as to achieve the descent into great depths without harm by taking a series of short breaths, followed by the deep dive where they hold their breaths for the entire time before they quickly rise to the surface. They do this again and again to obtain as much sea produce as possible. Their equipment includes goggles, a sickle for cutting seaweed, a knife for opening sea urchins, a spear for protection, and a pronged hoe to pick between the rock cracks. During harvest season on the land the women also gather sweat potatoes from their small plots of land that each family owns.

The author tells us that Young-sook was born into a long line of women divers and is destined to inherit her mother's position as leader of one of the diving collectives. She becomes a wife through the common practice of an arranged marriages, as does her friend Mi-ja, and she has several children. But her husband, surprisingly, is not from one of the village families, but instead a Korean teacher who receives his training in Japan. On several occasions Young-sook joins volunteer diving collectives to hunt for sea food near Vladivostok, Russia and elsewhere. In all,

she eventually dives in the Yellow Sea, Sea of Japan, and the East China Sea.

The story of her experiences covers many decades, beginning during a period of Japanese colonialism in the 1930s and 1940s, followed by World War II, the Korean War, and its aftermath.

During the Japanese occupation of Korea the divers had to secretly engage in their traditional fishing rituals because they were forbidden to do so by the Japanese authorities. They had to bow to the Japanese whenever the encountered one of the officials, and the Japanese could abuse them without consequences. The Japanese also conscripted Korean men and boys from the small villages to carry loads for the army and to participate in the invasion of China. Most of these conscripts were never heard from again. There were a number of protest demonstrations against the Japanese abuses during this period, one of the largest being led by women and numbering seventeen thousand participants.

When the war ended, the Americans arrived and the Japanese returned home. Every Korean community then organized Committees for the Preparation for Korean Independence. This, however, did not end the colonial problems for Young-sook and the other divers on Jeju Island. The Americans, in their desire to impose an American-type democracy on the country, showed little appreciation or understanding for the actual desires of the Korean people. Again, the Koreans resorted to demonstrations and protest strikes. On one occasion, farmers, factory workers, policemen, teachers, post office workers, and of course the women divers all participated in a demonstration. About two hundred people were arrested during this strike.

Without going any further into the author's interesting tale, it can be said that this is a beautifully rendered story of two women whose individual choices become inextricably tangled. Independent booksellers have already honored the novel by selecting it as an Indie Next pick, while Barnes & Noble chose this novel for its nationwide March 2019 Book Club.

By Foster Stockwell

Grew up in China (12 years) first in Fujian Province and then in Szechuan Province (city of Chengdu) as the son of American missionaries. Returned to the U.S. just before the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor in 1941.

After completing college, became a writer and editor working for various magazine, newspaper, and book publishers. For 20 years was a senior editor for World Book Encyclopedia

in Chicago, and for 10 years was the publishing director for China Books and Periodicals.

Has written six published books, two of which are about China (Religion in China Today, and Westerners in China) and has traveled to China more than 15 times over the past 25 years, working as a polisher and consultant for the Foreign Languages Press in Beijing.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Lisa See in [Madrid](#) (2012), by Asís G. Ayerbe

In her beloved *New York Times* bestsellers *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, *The Tea Girl of Hummingbird Lane*, *Peony in Love*, *Shanghai Girls*, *Dreams of Joy*, and *China Dolls*, Lisa See has brilliantly illuminated the strong bonds between women. These books have been celebrated for their authentic, deeply researched, lyrical stories about Chinese characters and cultures.

Now, in *The Island of Sea Women*, Ms. See writes about the free-diving women of South Korea's Jeju Island. *Booklist* called *The Island of Sea Women* "stupendous... enthralling...and engrossing."

Jodi Picoult has given her praise: "Lisa See excels at mining the intersection of family, friendship and history, and in her newest novel, she reaches new depths exploring the matrifocal *haenyeo* society in Korea, caught between tradition and modernization.