

Farewell My Concubine: Novel, A

By Lilian Lee

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Beginning amid the decadent glamour of China in the 1930s and ending in the 1980s in Hong Kong, this brilliant novel, which formed the basis for the award-winning movie, is the passionate story of an opera student who falls in love with his best friend, and the beautiful woman who comes between them.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly
The film version of this novel, which created a furor at this year's Cannes Film Festival, might well be more satisfying than the novel itself, which has both an irresistible setting and a smart plot crying for more heartfelt emotion than the wooden reactions Lee has given to her characters. The title comes from the name of a Peking Opera classic that is also the preferred showpiece of Duan Xiaolou and Cheng Dieyi, two actors who have been together since they started as young boys under the same strict master. Xiaolou becomes a sheng , playing generals and other male leads, while Dieyi becomes a dan , playing his consort, concubine and other female leads in the all-male Peking Opera. Completely immersed in his role, Dieyi falls in love with his "general." Much to his chagrin, Xiaolou prefers a common prostitute. Alternately feted and despised, the two friends weather the vicissitudes of the nationalists, the Japanese occupation, early communism and final humiliation at the hands of the Cultural Revolution. The author of The Last Princess of Manchuria has tailored an intricate brocade gown, but has neglected to put a body inside it.
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From Library Journal
Prolific Hong Kong writer Lee (The Last Princess of Manchuria , LJ 7/92) sets an intricate love triangle against the backdrop of China during the warlord period, the Japanese occupation, the Communist victory, and the Cultural Revolution. Singers Duan Xiaolou and Cheng Dieyi grow up together and come to play leading roles at the Peking Opera; their bravura performance is Farewell to My Concubine , in which the devoted mistress of a general kills herself rather than face her man's defeat. Cheng incarnates female roles so totally that he falls passionately in love with Duan, who feels only brotherly affection for his stage partner and marries a beautiful courtesan. The obsessive Cheng tries repeatedly to undermine the marriage. Unlike most Chinese fiction, this novel seamlessly integrates the personal and the social; its riveting drama of a menage a trois also reveals the burden of recent Chinese history. For most collections.
- *Cherry W. Li, Univ. of Southern California Lib., Los Angeles*
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From Kirkus Reviews
From bestselling Hong Kong writer Lee (The Last Princess of Manchuria, 1992): a breathless and broad-brushed tale of love among the stars of the Peking opera, the movie version of which won top prize at Cannes and is scheduled for simultaneous release. Sold by his prostitute mother to a director of a school that trains young boys to be singers in the Peking opera, timid Xiao Douzi is soon befriended by older and braver Xiao Shitou. Life at the training school is rigorous if not harsh, but Douzi, who shows much promise, is protected for the most part by Shitou, who's strong enough to split a brick in two with his forehead. The boys grow, give performances, and, as their abilities are recognized, eventually become the stars of a leading company. Their favorite opera is Farewell to My Concubine, in which the manly Shitou sings the role of a defeated general, and Douzi, who's perfected all the necessary gestures, plays the role of his beloved and loyal concubine. Immersed in their art, the two young men are only gradually aware of what's happening in China itself. The Japanese invade, occupy; civil war breaks out; and then Mao takes over. Meanwhile, Shitou marries a former prostitute, much to the despair of Douzi, who loves him. The political turmoil curtails their performances, but their troubles worsen during the Cultural Revolution: Douzi is accused of being a collaborator; both are denounced for participating in a decadent art; both are forced to undergo reeducation, brutal interrogations, and exile in the countryside. Years later, they meet up in Hong Kong, and the two old singers sing their favorite duets--but it's too late: The old affection can't survive; ``the glittering tragedy is over." A contemporary action-packed Chinese history lesson and love story with as much nuance as a

revolutionary slogan. The movie must be better. -- *Copyright ©1993, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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