



On Gold Mountain

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Lisa See's history of her Chinese American family offers a compelling version of America's archetypal immigrant saga. Fong See, only fourteen years old upon his arrival in the United States, came in search of a negligent father and stayed to create a business and a family that would continue to leave its mark on California late into the twentieth century. Early in his endeavors he secured a helpmeet and later a wife in the person of Letticie ("Ticie") Pruet, orphaned daughter of Oregon homesteaders, who sought out a clerkship in See's lingerie factory as a desperate alternative to a life of prostitution. Under her guidance, the illiterate See left lingerie behind to focus on imported curios and, later, Asian antiques, and thereby made his fortune. His "marriage" to Ticie was actually a contracted partnership since California law forbade miscegenation. Together they raised five children, only to have the family rupture as a consequence of Fong See's renewed ties to China, which included his taking a young Chinese girl as another wife.

The See offspring (as distinct from the seven children born into the second family, or Fongs) provide the central emphasis of the book's later half as the author traces their respective adulthoods and plots both the economic and romantic adventures of each. Second son Ray proves his father's real heir in terms of his own ambition and business acumen; Eddy, the author's grandfather, shows himself the least able to maneuver in that milieu but works hardest to preserve the notion of family that his mother had made the centerpiece of their emotional lives before and after her heartbreaking divorce.

Finally, See depicts the eccentric if short-lived marriage of her own parents, Richard See and Carolyn Laws (herself a successful writer). She concludes the book with a description of her trip to China in search of Fong See's past and a key to her own sense of self within this complicated family.

Sources for Further Study

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