



Book Review

by Pat Bertschy

THE PIANO TEACHER, BY JANICE Y. K. LEE 2008

This is a love story of shifting loyalties that evolves slowly against a backdrop of World War II. The Japanese occupation of Hong Kong affects everyone - including well-off British expatriates who suddenly find themselves in internment camps groveling for favors and fighting for survival.

Will, Trudy and Claire, the Piano Teacher of the title, are residents of Hong Kong in the early 1940's and 50's. These complex and well-drawn characters drive the story. It's a love story, but so much more.

Will and Trudy are opposites. Her lack of integrity contrasts with his moral compass. "Sometimes," Trudy tells Will, "you have to do things you don't want to. We can't all live in perfect harmony with our integrity."

Will is drawn to Trudy for her lack of conscience. Trudy is one of those people who seem to go through life untouched, in her own words, "bullet proof," while Will seems to be drawn to injury. For Will, there are things - honor, for instance - that are more important than survival. He secretly questions himself, wondering is it not honor, but cowardice that drives his actions?

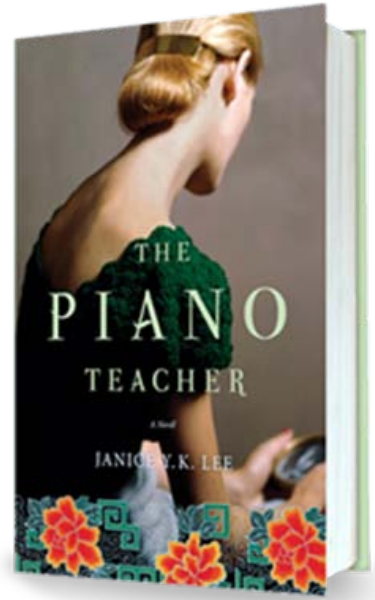
Will is drawn to Claire because of her innocence: "Her naïveté was a salve to his battered expectations. Wasn't love always some form of narcissism after all?" he wonders. Claire is a foil. It is through his relationship with her that we begin to understand his relationship with Trudy.

Debut author Janice Y. K. Lee is excellent at minimalist writing: "Mary Winkle enters and the two women embrace, one large, one small. They go into another room." We have already met these women and this brief description gives us a very clear picture of their interchange.

Plot twists are alluded to rather than developed. Instead of long narratives, the author gives us small glimpses into the mystery that draws the main characters together. The novel contains some sharp, clear images that are deeply moving. Watching a relationship end: "...their anger running clear through them like a solvent. It washed away their short past and allowed them to wipe it clean."

In summary the story is intriguing, but the plot is secondary to the characters' questions of integrity, honor, and self-preservation. The book moves beautifully through its mystery and is incredibly tight for a first novel.

Reviewed by Pat Bertschy, an avid reader who lives in Brewster.



Available at www.janiceylee.com and www.amazon.com

Audio & Video Links:

Listen to an interview with Janice Y. K. Lee and an excerpt of The Piano Teacher (right click to download)

<http://us.penguin.com/static/html/fof/audio/winter09/thepianoteacher.mp3>

Watch an online interview with author Janice Y. K. Lee

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nUD2-UMMZIk>