

[PDF] The Binding Chair: Or, A Visit From The Foot Emancipation Society

Kathryn Harrison - pdf download free book

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Description:

One of the women in Kathryn Harrison's *The Binding Chair* has a mind "which had always suffered from morbid imaginings." Harrison could be telling a gentle joke on herself here, for she has stuffed her novel with such imaginings. Here are broken fingers, abortions, *Marathon Man*-style dentistry, sodomy (not in a good way), and even an abused chicken. One particular morbidity, though, is the spur of the tale.

May, a young Chinese woman, suffers the brutal ritual of foot binding at the turn of the last century. The book follows May from a bad marriage (think *Raise the Red Lantern*) to Shanghai, "the infamous city of danger and opportunity." May--either despite or because of her foot's deformity--is considered a woman of astonishing beauty. "Each part of May, her cuticles and wristbones and earlobes, the

blue-white luminous hollow between her clavicles, inspired the same conclusion: that to assemble her had required more than the usual workaday genius of biology." Her beauty, her fetishistically bound feet, and her quick mastery of a handful of languages earn her a pile of money and finally a Western husband.

May develops a close relationship with her husband's Jewish family, especially with her unruly niece Alice. Harrison's scrupulously researched novel follows the two of them from Shanghai to London and back again, encountering along the way a colorful cast of women who've all suffered a disfigurement, mental or physical, that echoes May's. Finally several of the women come together in Nice, where each works out her destiny. *The Binding Chair* is far-flung, geographically and emotionally, and never quite coalesces, but perhaps the author was intentionally seeking to make a story about the Chinese and the Jews that has a feeling of diaspora. You've got to hand it to Harrison. Most writers, upon developing a fascination with Shanghai, would write a nice article for *Travel & Leisure* and have done with it. Kathryn Harrison has forged an ambitious novel. --*Claire Dederer* --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

From Publishers Weekly As she demonstrated in *Poison*, Harrison renders historical settings with textured fidelity. Here she spins an exotic and irresistible tale set mainly in Shanghai at the turn of the last century, with evocative side trips through Russia, England and the French Riviera. The changing culture of China is reflected in the life of a compelling character. Born in 1884, May must submit to foot binding as a child, and thereafter endures constant pain and the constriction of her freedom. Despite her deformed feet, at 14 she escapes a sadistic husband and pursues a new life in a brothel in Shanghai, where she eventually marries a kindhearted Jewish immigrant from Australia who's a member of the Foot Emancipation Society. May's stubborn, indomitable spirit isn't hampered by her husband's inability to find a job, since they live in the opulent household of his sister and her husband, and their two daughters--the younger of whom comes under May's thrall. Manipulative and autocratic, May spends her life despising her useless feet, fighting convention and adoring her high-spirited niece. But she cannot escape the ancient legends and superstitions that shadow her life, or the opium habit she develops after several emotional blows. Lost children are one theme here, and the varied ways people deal with such loss. Another is the lot of women striving to be independent in a hostile world. Harrison describes in harrowing detail the barbaric foot-binding ritual, various forms of sexual brutality, parental abuse and official torture. She is equally deft at social comedy, erotic titillation and tender sentiment. This is her best work to date, an intricately and elegantly constructed narrative about intersections of character and fate, history and chance, and the ironic, tragic fulfillment of hearts' desires. 12-city author tour. (May)
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