

Skokie Public Library's Book Discussion Guide

Snow Flower and the Secret Fan by Lisa See

- Customs and rituals play an important role in the historical context of the novel, foot binding being the most prominent example. Is it understandable – within the culture and the time period - that women continued to perpetuate this custom, enduring and inflicting pain to make themselves desirable? How does this compare to current beauty practices in our own culture? Do cultural mores ever make a custom that inflicts pain on children justifiable?
- Lily mentions many different kinds of love – pity love, mother love, respectful love, gratitude love, and deep-heart love (p. 5, p. 59-60). How does Lily experience the different types of love in her relationships with people in her life? Do you agree with her that all the troubles in her life stem from her “unjustified desire” to be loved (p. 3)? Can you relate to her experience as a child?
- On p. 4, Lily explains that the written word for “mother love” is a combination of the characters for pain and love. Discuss Lily and Snow Flower’s relationships with their mothers. What kind of mothers did they become when they had children?
- Laotong (old sames) and sworn sisters were important elements in Chinese women’s lives. What is the difference between the two? Have you experienced these types of relationships in your lives? Do you think Lily and Snow Flower were a good match to be laotongs? How did their personalities differ even though they were both “horses?” Discuss the erotic scene on p. 84. Do you think their relationship had a physical, i.e. sexual, component?
- In their Letters of Vituperation, both Lily and Snow Flower sing/chant their grievances with each other. What does each of them accomplish and/or hope to gain by doing so? Knowing the customs of the times, do you think they could have expected any different outcome?
- Was Lily justified in her feelings of betrayal by Snow Flower? Did you understand why Snow Flower was unable to be totally truthful with Lily? Lily is seeking atonement in the story. Do you think Snow Flower forgave her? Do you think she was actually sorry for her actions or merely their results? Does she think she has made atonement? Did they all lie to Lily or should she have caught on earlier? How did Lily “betray” her friendship with Snow Flower after their marriages?
- What is the significance of nu shu in terms of the story? How important is it to the women and how did it contribute to the ultimate misunderstanding between Snow Flower and Lily? Do you believe the men knew about the writing and if they did, what was their attitude towards it?
- Toward the end of the mountain section, Snow Flower says to Lily : “You have everything, and yet you have nothing?” What do you think she means (p. 210)? What is lacking in Lily’s life? Also, on p. 221 Madame Wang tells Lily “you have abundance in your life...an abundance of malice, ingratitude and forgetfulness.”
- How did the experience in the mountains change each of the characters?
- The male characters exist on the periphery of the story, much as the women were on the periphery of society. How does the author give glimpses into their characters and feelings? Are they presented as complex individuals? What did you learn about men in China during the period? What were the relationships between Lily and Snow Flower and their husbands like?



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- What did you learn about women's positions in Chinese society during this time period? Talk about the different kinds of power that women had available to them. On p. 29, the most important lesson for women is to "obey for your own good." Lily's mother-in-law gives her the advice to obey, obey, obey, and then do what you want. Do women have any value in this culture or are they truly worthless, as Snow Flower insists on p. 170?
- The inner realm of the women is contrasted with the outer realm of the men. This novel is set during a period of great upheaval in China, yet we are given only glimpses of the current events of the time. In your opinion, did this add or detract from the story?
- Lily is telling this story from memory. What has she learned about herself over time and how does she view her actions in hindsight? Do you think Snow Flower's version of events might have differed any? Lily tells us several times that, in her earlier life, she had "not yet become the generous Lady Lu" (p. 112). In your opinion, has Lily really changed over the course of her life?
- The author mentions that even in her lifetime (she was born in 1955) the phrase "when a girl, obey your father, when a wife, obey your husband; when a widow, obey your son" was instilled in her. Were you surprised by this?
- The sentiment uttered by Madame Wang on p. 131 that "there is little a woman can do in this life to change her fate" is repeated throughout the book. What is your feeling about pre-determination and the role of fate in people's lives? Discuss how astrology played an important part in the daily lives of the characters. What are your opinions on how they used it to make important life decisions and to judge the actions of others?
- What appealed most to you about this book? Did you recognize any universal themes? Would you recommend it to others to read? Did you have a favorite character or a character that you identified with?
- The author inserted several Chinese fables/stories into the novel (the story of the three brothers, the story of the Yao people, etc., stories chanted by the women). What purpose did these serve for the characters and for the reader?
- Discuss the life cycle of women in the book (daughter days, hair-pinning days, rice and salt days, sitting quietly) and compare it to the stages of our own modern lives.