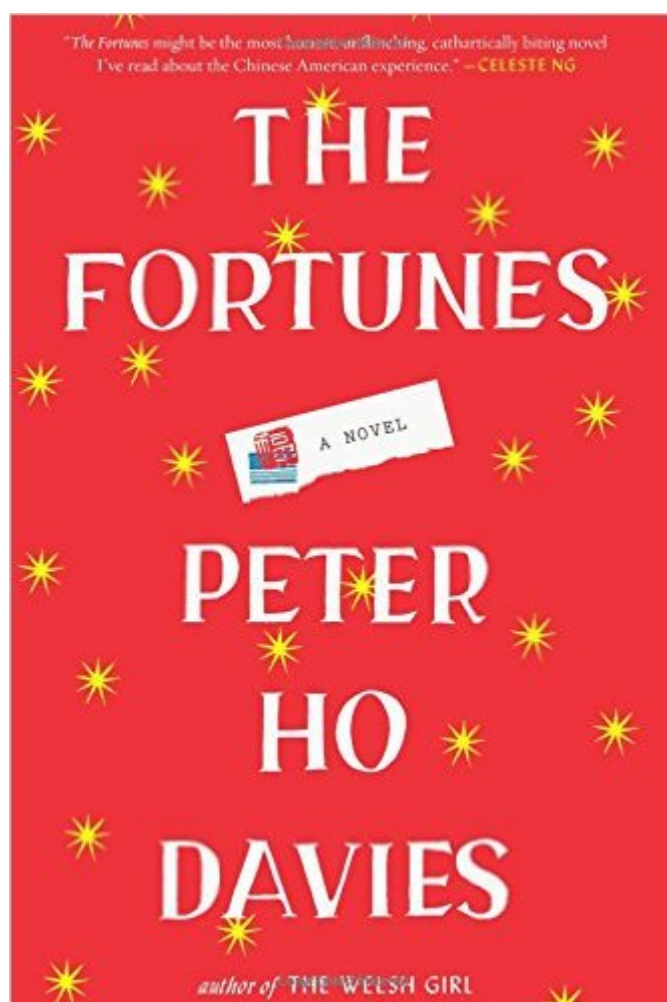


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The Fortunes



Synopsis

From the author of *The Welsh Girl* comes a groundbreaking, provocative new novel. Sly, funny, intelligent, and artfully structured, *The Fortunes* recasts American history through the lives of Chinese Americans and reimagines the multigenerational novel through the fractures of immigrant family experience. Inhabiting four lives—a railroad baron's valet who unwittingly ignites an explosion in Chinese labor, Hollywood's first Chinese movie star, a hate-crime victim whose death mobilizes Asian Americans, and a biracial writer visiting China for an adoption—this novel captures and capsizes over a century of our history, showing that even as family bonds are denied and broken, a community can survive as much through love as blood. Building fact into fiction, spinning fiction around fact, Davies uses each of these stories—three inspired by real historical characters—to examine the process of becoming not only Chinese American, but American.

Book Information

Hardcover: 288 pages

Publisher: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (September 6, 2016)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0544263707

ISBN-13: 978-0544263703

Product Dimensions: 6 x 1 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 15.2 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.6 out of 5 stars— See all reviews (7 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #26,434 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #55 in Books > Literature & Fiction > United States > Asian American #160 in Books > Literature & Fiction > Genre Fiction > Historical > Biographical #1148 in Books > Literature & Fiction > Contemporary

Customer Reviews

The Fortunes by Peter Ho Davies are four different stories about Chinese Americans. They are Gold: Celestial Railroad, Silver: Your Name in Chinese, Jade: Fast as Lightning and Pearl: Disorientation. All the stories are written with great skill, thought and feeling. All of them are engrossing. I don't read stories as much as full books because if they are great, I go through a mourning period when the story is done and I have to let go of my connection with the main character. That happened this time. Each character is very developed and you feel like you are there with that person in their shoes as their lives move on. One theme that runs through the

stories is of not fitting in. In Pearl, John Smith has a white father and Chinese mother. When he was in the United States, he was thought of by others as being Chinese, when he was in China, he was thought as being American. It is a strange situation of looking one way and being another. That story really clicked with me because my husband is Chinese American and he had round eyes. So he has never fit anywhere either. I do not feel compelled to discuss all of the stories, I want them to be a surprise for you. One that really impressed me was a fictionalized biographical sketch of Anna May Wong. I have a book of early Hollywood Stars with several pictures of her. I felt sad for her. She was bullied at school and by her father at home. She escaped into movie theaters and enjoyed the safety of being invisible. When you are the audience, people are not watching you. She thought about how wonderful it would be to be stared at because you were a star. She was acting during periods of great prejudice against Asians and by her playing the roles, she made them real to the audience. A short aside. I did not realize that President Hoover and his wife knew Mandarin and communicated in it when they wanted to keep something secret from the White House staff. I know some Mandarin too and at several of the wedding parties, I heard myself talked about. That was very enlightening. Made me feel like a spy!! highly recommend this group of stories if you are interested in stepping in another's shoes or just want to understand part of what goes on when you become American.

This book is a bit hard to review because it consists of four parts (of greatly varying quality) which can be read and grasped separately, although they all have the common theme of racism. I felt almost like the author simply put four novellas in one volume. The first section is written in the third person past tense. It's mainly about a Chinese man, Ling, who takes a job as a valet to a baron of the Central Pacific Railroad during a time where Chinese workers were being exploited (post Civil War; Lincoln has recently been assassinated). Originally, he is sold to a man, "Uncle" Ng, who runs a combined laundry and brothel, where he helps with the former and falls in love with one of the girls who works in the latter. There is a great deal of prejudice from the "ghosts," or whites who live in the same town. Ling, whose unknown father was white, develops a desire to find gold himself, and eventually leaves the baron to perform various tasks on the railway line. The second part shifts abruptly into the present tense with the protagonist referred to simply as "she." It takes a few pages before she's identified as Anna Mae Wong, the first Chinese American movie star, and we follow her path from a little movie-struck girl to a respected (but not quite accepted in some circles) actress and finally to her career's end. The third part of the book is told from the first person perspective of the friend of Vincent Chin, an Asian man who was the victim of a famous hate crime in the eighties.

The verdict, which was widely considered unfair, helped unite Asians of different backgrounds to form a movement to have the case reopened (and the perps properly punished). The fourth takes place in the present day (third person) and portrays John Smith, a biracial writer and academic who, after a series of disappointments when his wife attempts to conceive a child, decides to adopt a Chinese baby girl. The pair travel to China in the company of other American couples planning to adopt, as well. To put it mildly, John is ambivalent about the adoption, the issues the child will face in the US, and the attitudes of their American companions. There are lots of racist jokes about Asians in this section, although they can be found in all four. Personally, I felt the author could have made the same point by putting in a great many less, and there is one that does not get a punchline, but is so offensive, I almost closed the book. Each part is set progressively along in time in the US and features a Chinese American struggling to come to terms with their racial identity, something that can change depending on who they are with and those people's perceptions. "The Fortunes," is beautifully written, but I had varying responses to each section, i.e., I felt the pace was glacially slow in the first; enjoyed the second greatly, liked the third, and disliked the fourth (mostly because of the crude sex talk and the aforementioned jokes). Your mileage may vary.

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