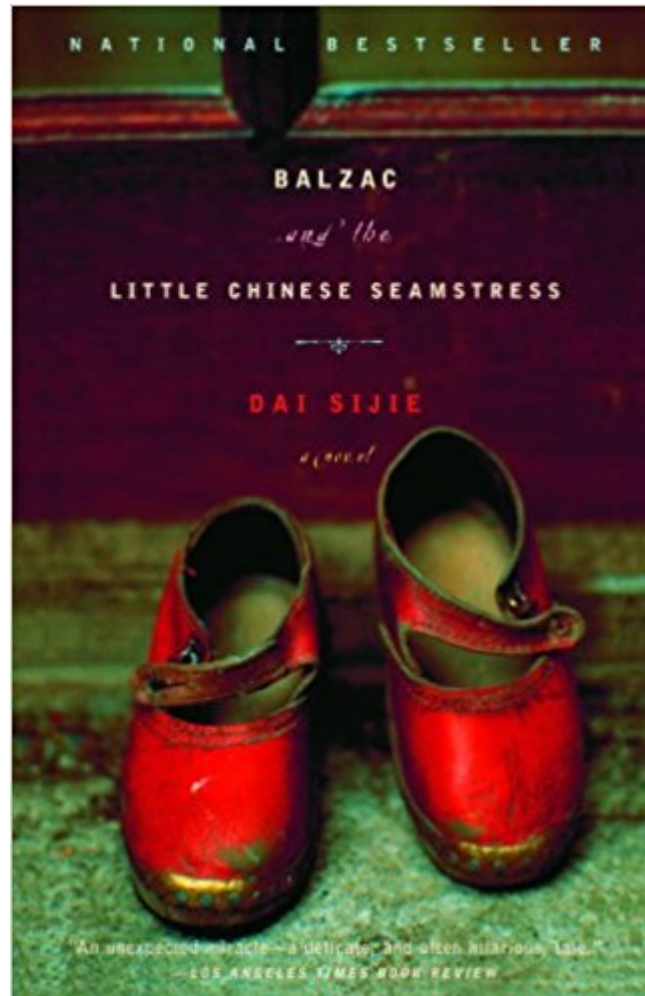




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Balzac And The Little Chinese Seamstress: A Novel



Synopsis

New York Times Bestseller *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* is an enchanting tale that captures the magic of reading and the wonder of romantic awakening. An immediate international bestseller, it tells the story of two hapless city boys exiled to a remote mountain village for re-education during China's infamous Cultural Revolution. There the two friends meet the daughter of the local tailor and discover a hidden stash of Western classics in Chinese translation. As they flirt with the seamstress and secretly devour these banned works, the two friends find transit from their grim surroundings to worlds they never imagined.

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Customer Reviews

The Cultural Revolution of Chairman Mao Zedong altered Chinese history in the 1960s and '70s, forcibly sending hundreds of thousands of Chinese intellectuals to peasant villages for "re-education." This moving, often wrenching short novel by a writer who was himself re-educated in the '70s tells how two young men weather years of banishment, emphasizing the power of literature to free the mind. Sijie's unnamed 17-year-old protagonist and his best friend, Luo, are bourgeois doctors' sons, and so condemned to serve four years in a remote mountain village, carrying pails of excrement daily up a hill. Only their ingenuity helps them to survive. The two friends are good at storytelling, and the village headman commands them to put on "oral cinema shows" for the villagers, reciting the plots and dialogue of movies. When another city boy leaves the mountains, the friends steal a suitcase full of forbidden books he has been hiding, knowing he will be afraid to call

the authorities. Enchanted by the prose of a host of European writers, they dare to tell the story of *The Count of Monte Cristo* to the village tailor and to read Balzac to his shy and beautiful young daughter. Luo, who adores the Little Seamstress, dreams of transforming her from a simple country girl into a sophisticated lover with his foreign tales. He succeeds beyond his expectations, but the result is not what he might have hoped for, and leads to an unexpected, droll and poignant conclusion. The warmth and humor of Sijie's prose and the clarity of Rilke's translation distinguish this slim first novel, a wonderfully human tale. (Sept. 17) Forecast: Sijie's debut was a best-seller and prize winner in France in 2000, and rights have been sold in 19 countries; it is also scheduled to be made into a film. Its charm translates admirably strong sales can be expected on this side of the Atlantic. Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Library Binding edition.

Adult/High School-This beautifully presented novella tracks the lives of two teens, childhood friends who have been sent to a small Chinese village for "re-education" during Mao's Cultural Revolution. Sons of doctors and dentists, their days are now spent muscling buckets of excrement up the mountainside and mining coal. But the boys-Luo and the unnamed narrator-receive a bit of a reprieve when the villagers discover their talents as storytellers; they are sent on monthly treks to town, tasked with watching a movie and relating it in detail on their return. It is here that they encounter the little seamstress of the title, whom Luo falls for instantly. When, through a series of comic and clever tricks and favors, the boys acquire a suitcase full of forbidden Western literature, Luo decides to "re-educate" the ignorant girl whom he hopes will become his intellectual match. That a bit of Balzac can have an aphrodisiac effect is a happy bonus. Ultimately, the book is a simple, lovely telling of a classic boy-meets-girl scenario with a folktale's smart, surprising bite at the finish. The story movingly captures Maoism's attempts to imprison one's mind and heart (with the threat of the same for one's body), the shock of the sudden cultural shift for "bourgeois" Chinese, and the sheer delight that books can offer a downtrodden spirit. Though these moments are fewer after the love story is introduced, teens will enjoy them at least as much as the comic and romantic strands. Emily Lloyd, Fairfax County Public Library, VA Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Library Binding edition.

Set during the re-education of the Chinese well to do, this little novel is breath taking. Not the most lyrical, as it has been translated and re-released, but the message of the story is profound. As books have been banned, what is the price to find and have access to forbidden books? As our main

characters dream of the lives they once had and the world that is waiting for them, their obsession and appreciation of the written word is stunning. The dreams that it unlocks, and the spell that literature weaves on those who are denied it unravels in a most beautiful and interesting way. The book itself is a treasure, with beautifully printed jacket pages and a gripping cover photography..... this book is simple and short, but will leave you with a lot to talk about once it is finished. I bought this on as it was recommended to me due to other books I have rated highly- and I am so glad that I did. It is a rare and great find, in a small and simple way.

And the problem? Why do so very few people read any serious works? And why do even a smaller subset of those read some old “fusty” classic? Like sex, if it is “forbidden,” it only heightens one’s interest. Mao Zedong initiated the Cultural Revolution in China in 1966. It was his response to the failure of his “Great Leap Forward,” which he commenced in 1958, in the hopes of rapidly industrializing the country, and featured, in part, Chinese peasants attempting to make steel in their backyards. The Cultural Revolution attempted to rid the society of bourgeois and foreign influences, and this included Western literature, such as that written by Honoré de Balzac. The author of this work, Dai Sijie, would live through this very difficult period. So would I! But, fortunately, outside China, and I remember the news reports as being very sketchy as to what was truly transpiring in the country. Dai Sijie provides confirmation that it was a very unpleasant time with society in a self-destructive mode, with enemies under every proverbial bed. Hum. Other societies have also been there. Dai Sijie would eventually be permitted to immigrate to France, in 1984. The novel opens in 1971. Luo is 18. The unnamed narrator is 17. Both have been uprooted from their homes in Chengdu, a city of four million people, which is the capital of Szechuan province, with a population of 100 million. They have been sent to a very remote mountain village, high on Phoenix of the Sky Mountain, which is accessible only by foot, for “re-education,” since they have been identified as members of the bourgeois class. Luo’s father is a dentist, and had worked on “the Great Helmsman of the Revolution” himself, Chairman Mao. That connection did not save him from a graphically described public humiliation in the stadium. The narrator’s parents are intellectuals of sort, teachers, and hence the (perhaps) one way ticket to Phoenix of the Sky Mountain. When they arrive, they are carrying a violin. The peasants have never seen one before, and are prepared to destroy it. Luo plays a sonata on it. Quick thinking, by calling the musical piece “Mozart is thinking of Chairman

Mao's revolution saved the instrument. It is a re-education, or, at least a different education. One of their assigned tasks is to carry the human and animal fertilizer (a/k/a fecal material) to the fields in baskets on their backs. Despite this, and other unpleasantness, they do manage to run the system fairly well, and are soon permitted to go to a neighboring town, see the movie, and provide a narration of it in the evenings to the villagers. In their travels, they meet another son of the bourgeois, aptly named "four-eyes." They discover his cache of forbidden Western literature (in translation), with Balzac's works being preeminent. And then there is the matter of love coupled with lust, for the most attractive young women in another village, a young seamstress whose father is one also, and most conveniently travels a lot. Luo wants to use the Western literature to "re-educate" the young seamstress out of her peasant origins. Dai Sijie stirs these elements into a page-turning story. This novel recalled Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*, which concerned another non-Western culture during a time of oppression, and a few people who would use Western literature as a sanity life-preserver. I felt that Dai Sijie did a much better job with this central theme. It is a shame, because I continue to like the idea of a "re-education" of sorts, more in the form of a highly incentivized form of "national service" whereby, in particular, the elites have a couple of years experiencing how the "deplorables" live. Admittedly, it did not work out very well during the Cultural Revolution, and the concept of "national service" has very little traction among the hustling elites who would be resentful of any break in their career moves, which would include reading Balzac. For Dai Sijie experience, and tales from the Cultural Revolution, with its positive side-effect of instilling a deep appreciation for the classics, 5-stars.

The good news about this YA novel was the immersion into Mao period culture and the revelation (if you didn't already know it) of the cultural suppression imposed at that time. Also, the book was beautifully crafted writing and in that sense a joy to read. That said, the plot line wandered a bit and had very little tension considering the milieu in which it was set. It was not even close to a page turner, although it was interesting primarily because of the setting. As a character driven novel, IMHO, it falls into a more literary category.

This book is definitely a must. The author writes a story in a setting that very few of us will have ever

experienced, but through his entirely familiar characters, brings up issues and emotions each of us will have felt at some point in life. He brings out the frustration of loving a girl that belongs to someone else, and watching that someone else lose her. The walls and roadblocks brought out by politicians that stop them from obtaining a legal abortion are very deep to any couple who cannot get married because it is not allowed by law, or who can not obtain a cure that stem cells may give them because the law does not allow it. The exile from family and learning to live in a new world is familiar to any child who has left their parents home. While they are exiled, and their situation is much more serious, the feelings of loss and aloneness, as well as those of wonder at a new world, bring an empathic throb from any heart. Does anyone else relate to this book in a personal way? Or am I the only one?

Meh. It's an okay book, but in my opinion is lacking in the plot department. There is no true distinguishable "climax" of the book, but maybe you could consider (spoilers!) it to be the Little Seamstress' abortion. Historically it's pretty good, but again I feel nothing really happens.

If you are in to novels that focus on a period and place in history and talk about how the time effects the characters, you might like this book. I am a senior undergrad student TA'ing a class within my minor of contemporary history, and the professor assigned this book for the class to read. I had to read it before grading the essays. I finished the book over a long plane ride. The characters don't really have a huge amount of background or dimension, and I felt that the plot was a little predictable, but the book does lead to several good essay prompts.

This is the story of two boys sent to re-education camps in China during the cultural revolution of the 1960s. The boys soon find themselves separated permanently from their middle class/educated parents and forced into agricultural labor. They now live at the whims of an uneducated headman who they often are able to trick or deceive. The boys meet a young girl and a drama unfolds around the forbidden stories of Balzac that explores oppression, east and west, and the power of art to save the human spirit. Based loosely on Dai Sijie's life, this beautiful book will stick with you long after you have turned the last page.

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