

BOOK REVIEW

The Dancing Girl and the Turtle by Karen Kao

It's 1930s Shanghai and a tumultuous period in China's history. With this backdrop, Karen Kao introduces us to a remarkable young woman who finds her own way to survive the world she lives in and the circumstances fate throws at her.

The proud and spirited Song Anyi is violently raped on the way to Shanghai as she follows in the footsteps of her brother, Kang. Her physical recovery, safe in the luxurious city residence of her Auntie and Uncle, proceeds well but from there she starts a slow journey down a very different path. Grand plans and dreams are replaced with ghosts and a perversion for pain. Anyi's arrival also brings a fateful unrest upon the 'Turtle', her older cousin Cho. Up till now, blissfully happy in his cosseted life and all the pleasures it brings, Cho discovers new desires that are simply uncontrollable.

Ultimately Anyi's desire for independence and power over her own life never fades, but her method of achieving this may not sit comfortably with us: violence against women endures. This is no fairy-tale.

Kao's prose is vivid and immediate, with easily consumed chunks which shift between the viewpoints of a select range of characters, always gracefully executed never jarring. Themes of violence, shame and family loyalty abide throughout the book against a background of political and cultural change. With a light touch and with the focus firmly on her characters, Kao does just enough to illustrate the simmering conflict between China and Japan. After a successful law career in the US (where she was born) and the Netherlands, Kao cites her parents, Chinese immigrants, and their stories of their homeland as the inspiration for her writing.

These roots have served her well; in *The Dancing Girl* and *the Turtle* there's a confidence in her portrayal of Shanghai, its colours, smells and sounds; the weaving of modern and traditional city life as this international trade hub develops.

While there's a striking ending in store for you in this book, it's not a finale. Amongst Kao's other characters, Anyi's brother, Kang, and his American friend Max, are both intriguing young men seeking their place in the world. Where will their story go? Just launched this April, *The Dancing Girl* and *the Turtle* is the first of four interlocking novels which make up *The Shanghai Quartet*.

CATHY LEUNG

