



# The Island Of Sea Women

By Lisa See

## About the Author

In her beloved *New York Times* bestsellers *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, *The Tea Girl of Hummingbird Lane*, *Peony in Love*, *Shanghai Girls*, *Dreams of Joy*, and *China Dolls*, Lisa See has brilliantly illuminated the strong bonds between women. These books have been celebrated for their authentic, deeply researched, lyrical stories about Chinese characters and cultures. Now, in *The Island of Sea Women*, Ms. See writes about the free-diving women of South Korea's Jeju Island. *Booklist* called *The Island of Sea Women* "stupendous... enthralling...and engrossing." Jodi Picoult has given her praise: "Lisa See excels at mining the intersection of family, friendship and history, and in her newest novel, she reaches new depths exploring the matrifocal *haenyeo* society in Korea, caught between tradition and modernization. This novel spans wars and generations, but at its heart is a beautifully rendered story of two women whose individual choices become inextricably tangled." Independent booksellers honored the novel by selecting it as an Indie Next pick, while Barnes & Noble chose the novel for its nationwide March 2019 Book Club.

Ms. See has always been intrigued by stories that have been lost, forgotten, or deliberately covered up, whether in the past or happening right now in the world today. For *Snow Flower*, she traveled to a remote area of China—where she was told she was only the second foreigner ever to visit—to research the secret writing invented, used, and kept a secret by women for over a thousand years. Amy Tan called the novel "achingly beautiful, a marvel of imagination." Others agreed, and foreign-language rights for *Snow Flower* were sold to 39 countries. The novel also became a *New York Times* bestseller, a Book sense Number One Pick, has won numerous awards domestically and internationally, and was made into a feature film produced by Fox Searchlight.

Ms. See was born in Paris but grew up in Los Angeles. She lived with her mother but spent a lot of time with her father's family in Chinatown. Her first book, *On Gold Mountain: The One Hundred Year Odyssey of My Chinese-American Family* (1995), was a national bestseller and a *New York Times* NotableBook. The book traces the journey of Lisa's great-grandfather, Fong See, who overcame obstacles at every step to become the 100-year-old godfather of Los Angeles's Chinatown and the patriarch of a sprawling family.

While collecting the details for *On Gold Mountain*, she developed the idea for her first novel, *Flower Net* (1997), which was a national bestseller, a *New York Times* NotableBook, and on the *Los Angeles Times* Best Books List for 1997. *Flower Net* was also nominated for an Edgar award for best first novel. This was followed by two more mystery-thrillers, *The Interior* (2000) and *Dragon Bones* (2003), which once again featured the characters of Liu Hulan and David Stark. This series inspired critics to compare Ms. See to Upton Sinclair, Dashiell Hammett, and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

Ms. See has led an active and varied career. She was the *Publishers Weekly* West Coast Correspondent for thirteen years. As a freelance journalist, her articles have appeared in *Vogue*, *Self*, and *More*, as well as in numerous book reviews around the

country. She wrote the libretto for Los Angeles Opera based on *On Gold Mountain*, which premiered in June 2000 at the Japan American Theatre. She also served as guest curator for an exhibit on the Chinese-American experience at the Autry Museum of Western Heritage, which then traveled to the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., in 2001. Ms. See then helped develop and curate the Family Discovery Gallery at the Autry Museum, an interactive space for children and their families that focused on Lisa's bi-racial, bi-cultural family as seen through the eyes of her father as a seven-year-old boy living in 1930s Los Angeles. She has designed a walking tour of Los Angeles Chinatown and wrote the companion guidebook for Angels Walk L.A. to celebrate the opening of the MTA's Chinatown metro station. She also curated the inaugural exhibition—a retrospective of artist Tyrus Wong—for the grand opening of the Chinese American Museum in Los Angeles.

Ms. See was honored as National Woman of the Year by the Organization of Chinese American Women in 2001, was the recipient of the Chinese American Museum's History Makers Award in 2003, and received the Golden Spike Award from the Chinese Historical Society of Southern California in 2017. She sits on the boards of Los Angeles Opera, National Historic Preservation Trust, and The Music Center. She is a member of The Trusteeship, an organization comprised of preeminent women of achievement and influence in diverse fields.

Ms. See lives in Los Angeles. You can also follow her adventures on [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#) & [Facebook](#)

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## About the Book

**THE ISLAND OF SEA WOMEN** offers up an evocative tale of two best friends whose bonds are both strengthened and tested over decades by forces beyond their control. Set largely on the remote Korean island of Jeju, **THE ISLAND OF SEA WOMEN** follows Young-sook and Mi-ja, girls from strikingly different backgrounds who bond over their shared love of the sea. Working in their village's all-female diving collective, the two friends come of age in a community where gender roles are anything but typical. Here, women are the primary breadwinners, the heads of household in all but name, and yet, as Mi-ja and Young-sook come to realize, there are limits to their control that can prove devastating.

Over the years, Young-sook and Mi-ja endure together the loss of parents, the dramas of marriage and childbirth, cruel family members, disruptive technological advances, and the ever-present dangers that accompany their livelihood. They also face growing unrest from the political turmoil that surrounds their homeland: Japanese occupation gives way to World War II, the Korean War, and its aftermath, leaving the residents of Jeju caught between warring empires. The daughter of a Japanese collaborator, Mi-ja will forever bear the mark of her father's activities, while Young-sook looks poised to inherit her mother's role as the leader of her village diving collective. As their husbands' political ties and tumultuous world events threaten their friendship, Young-sook and Mi-ja see their remote island and everything they have known upended.

**THE ISLAND OF SEA WOMEN** deftly explores the complexities of female friendship and introduces readers to the remarkably strong and spirited female divers of Jeju Island. It's also an eye-opening portrait of a country ravaged by decades of conflict and unrest, and a searing examination of the effects that foreign intervention can have on the evolution of a nation and of course individual lives. It asks the eternal questions: How do we find forgiveness? Can we find forgiveness? Booklist has called the novel, "A stupendous multigenerational family saga, See's latest also provides an enthralling cultural anthropology highlighting the soon-to-be-lost, matriarchal haenyeo phenomenon and an engrossing history of violently tumultuous twentieth-century Korea... Stupendous...Mesmerizing."

Retrieved from: [The Island of Sea Women – Lisa See's Official Website](#)

## Discussion Questions

1. The story begins with Young-sook as an old woman, gathering algae on the beach. What secrets or clues about the past and the present are revealed in the scenes that take place in 2008? Why do we understand the beginning of the novel only after we have finished it?
2. When Young-sook and Mi-ja are fifteen, Young-sook's mother says to them: "You are like sisters, and I expect you to take care of each other today and every day as those tied by blood would do" (page 13). How are these words of warning? The friendship between Young-sook and Mi-ja is just one of many examples of powerful female relationships in the novel. Discuss the ways in which female relationships are depicted and the important role they play on Jeju.
3. On page 17, Young-sook's mother recites a traditional haenyeo aphorism: Every woman who enters the sea carries a coffin on her back. But she also says that the sea is like a mother (page 22). Then, on page 71, Grandmother says, "The ocean is better than your natal mother. The sea is forever." How do these contradictory ideas play out in the novel? What do they say about the dangerous work of the haenyeo?
4. In many ways, the novel is about blame, guilt, and forgiveness. In the first full chapter, Yu-ri has her encounter with the octopus. What effect does this incident have on various characters moving forward: Mother, Young-sook, Mi-ja, Do-saeng, Gu-ja, Gu-sun, and Jun-bu? Young-sook is also involved in the tragic death of her mother. To what extent is she responsible for these sad events? Is her sense of guilt justified?
5. On page 314, Clara recites a proverb attributed to Buddha: To understand everything is to forgive. Considering the novel as a whole, do you think this is true? Young-sook's mother must forgive herself for Yu-ri's accident, Young-sook must forgive herself for her mother's death, Gu-sun forgives Gu-ja for Wan-soon's death. On a societal level, the people of Jeju also needed to find ways to forgive each other. While not everyone on Jeju has found forgiveness, how and why do you think those communities, neighbors, and families have been able to forgive? Do you think anything can be forgiven eventually? Should it? Does Young-sook take too long to forgive given what she witnessed? Does the time-line move forward chronologically?

6. Mi-ja carries the burden of being the daughter of a Japanese collaborator. Is there an inevitability to her destiny just as there's an inevitability to Young-sook's destiny? Another way of considering this aspect of the story is, are we responsible for the sins of our fathers (or mothers)? Later in the novel, Young-sook will reflect on all the times Mi-ja showed she was the daughter of a collaborator. She also blames Yo-chan for being Mi-ja's son, as well as the grandson of a Japanese collaborator. Was Young-sook being fair, or had her eyes and heart been too clouded?
  
7. The haenyeo are respected for having a matrifocal culture—a society focused on women. They work hard, have many responsibilities and freedoms, and earn money for their households, but how much independence and power within their families and their cultures do they really have? Are there other examples from the story that illustrate the independence of women but also their subservience?
  
8. What is life like for men married to haenyeo? Compare Young-sook's father, Mi-ja's husband, and Young-sook's husband.
  
9. On page 189, there is mention of haenyeo from a different village rowing by Young-sook's collective to share gossip. How fast did information travel around the island and from the mainland? Was the five-day market a good source of gossip, or were there other places that were better? On page 201, Jun-bu mentions his concern about believing any source of news. Were there specific instances when information that was being dispersed was misleading or false? What affects how people hear and interpret the news?
  
10. Confucianism has traditionally played a lesser role on Jeju than elsewhere in Korea, while Shamanism is quite strong. What practical applications does Shamanism have for the haenyeo? Do the traditions and rituals help the haenyeo conquer the fears and anxieties they have about their dangerous work? Does it bring comfort during illness, death, and other tragedies? Does Young-sook ever question her beliefs, and why?
  
11. On page 39, Young-sook's mother recites the aphorism: If you plant red beans, then you will harvest red beans. Jun-bu repeats the phrase on page 199. How do these two characters interpret this saying? How does it play out for various characters?

12. At first it would seem that the visit of the scientists to the island is a digression. What important consequences does the visit have for Young-sook and the other haenyeo?
  
13. On page 120, Young-sook's mother-in-law, Do-saeng, says "There's modern, and then there's tradition." How does daily life on Jeju change between 1938 and 2008? Discuss architecture, the arrival of the scientists and the studies they conduct, the introduction of wet suits and television, and other changes. How does Young-sook reconcile her traditional haenyeo way of life with the encroaching modern world? Do you think it's possible to modernize without sacrificing important traditional values?
  
14. The characters have lived through Japanese colonialism, the Sino-Japanese War, World War II, the Korean War, the 4.3 Incident, and the Vietnam War. How do these larger historic events affect the characters and island life?
  
15. Mi-ja's rubbings are critical to the novel. How do they illustrate the friendship between Mi-ja and Young-sook? How do they help Young-sook in her process of healing?

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## Enhance Your Book Club and Deepen Your Discussion

- Consider reading Lisa See's *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, which follows a lifelong friendship between two women in 19th century China. Compare this friendship to the friendship between Young-sook and Mi-ja.
- To learn how to have your own Korean Tea & Tasting Package for Book Clubs, [click here](#).
- Time yourselves to see how long you can hold your breath. Now think about holding your breath for two minutes.
- In *The Island of Sea Women*, there's an expectation that a daughter should follow in her mother's footsteps. Did this surprise you? Discuss how common you think it is even today for daughters to follow in their mothers' footsteps—personally or professionally.
- If you have access to one, visit your local Korean history or art museum.
- Visit [Step Inside the World of \*The Island of Sea Women\*](#) to see maps, photos, and videos, and to learn about the haenyeo and Lisa's research.

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## Author Interview

[Lisa See share the stories behind 'The Island of Sea Women' - Los Angeles Times \(latimes.com\)](#)

### Other Links and Resources:

[Inside the Island of Sea Women – Just another Lisa See’s Official Website Sites site](#)

## Share your thoughts with other readers!

DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

BOOK CLUB: \_\_\_\_\_

BOOK TITLE: \_\_\_\_\_

As a group we rated this book:

1	2	3	4	5
Ugh!		It was OK...		Loved it!

Would we recommend this book to other book clubs?

Yes      No      Undecided

Why/why not?

Our discussion: