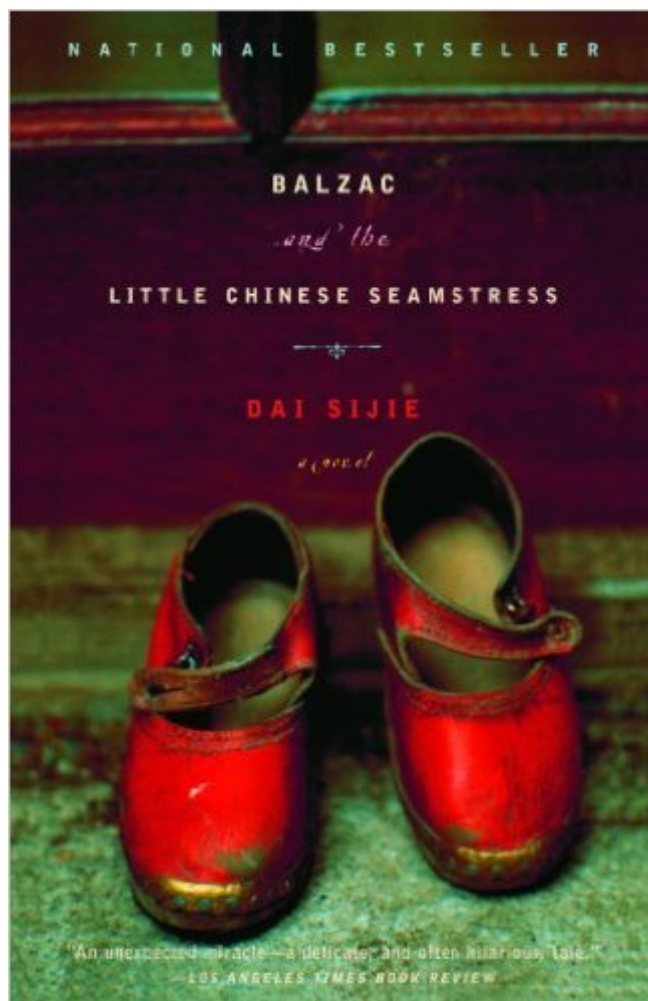


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Balzac And The Little Chinese Seamstress: A Novel



Synopsis

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.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Lovely book. Except for two brief shifts in narrative viewpoint, the story is told in a very simple, almost naive way. But that simplicity hides great richness. The story is about the power of dreams, imagination, fables, and the dangers they bring. The Cultural Revolution had forced two teenagers, the narrator and his friend, to relocate to a tiny mountainside village. And though these two young men are hardly shining lamps of erudition and culture, they manage to excite the imagination of their neighbors. Their violin (poorly played) charms the headmaster into accepting them into the village. The headmaster becomes enthralled, almost hypnotized with a clock with a rooster on the face, and its hold over him helps the two boys cope with farmwork. When the headmaster discovers the two can retell movies skillfully, they are sent to the larger village down the mountain expressly to watch films and retell them when they return. These things help them endure the rigors of Mao's

reeducation. The story creates for them a kind of tiny paradise. When they find (steal) a chest full of forbidden western classics, they are ecstatic. The stories are themselves dangerous, in Mao's paranoid, anti-intellectual, anti-western culture, where everyone was an informer and the crimes were not defined. But the stories are also dangerous for their exploration of the passions, for their power to excite the imagination, for their sheer craft and knowledge of the human heart. The narrator's friend begins to use Balzac's stories to woo a lovely seamstress. In the very briefest, most evocative possible way, Dai shows how the books bring hints of conflict and danger into this little village. The narrator finds he is jealous of his friend and the seamstress.

I first heard of this book when it was initially translated into English. Actually, what I heard was an extended discussion of the cover, by which a number of people were apparently fascinated. Moreover, everyone who read seemed to rave about it. My curiosity led me to pick up a copy soon after it came out. While I enjoyed this book, I did not find it to be quite the experience others did. It is a very good book, but, perhaps because it is more of a novella than a novel, I found myself wanting more information. On the other hand, that may speak well for the book, shouldn't a good author always leave you begging for more? The book tells the tale of two young friends who are exiled to a remote mountain village for re-education during China's Cultural Revolution. There they come in contact with the daughter of the local tailor and discover a hidden cache of Western novels (yes, including works by Balzac) which have been translated into Chinese. Both become enamored with the seamstress as they secretly read the banned works, and find some respite from their status as laborers in both reading and in performing oral movies for villagers. Throughout the tale, we are drawn into the lives of the two friends, although I never really connected with the characters or felt empathy with either of them. I was sympathetic to their situation, but I never really identified with them as I generally do with characters in a novel. But trust me, this is only a minor criticism and, based on other reviews, I am very much in the minority in feeling as I did. Moreover, I guess I was somewhat disappointed that the book did not move me as deeply as I thought it would after hearing about it.

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