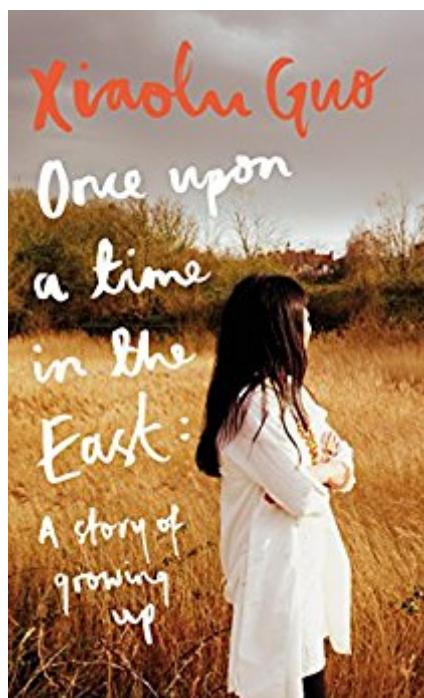


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Once Upon A Time In The East: A Story Of Growing Up



Synopsis

'This generation's Wild Swans' Daily Telegraph'One of the most startling and fascinating memoirs I've read in recent years...a story of China' Libby Purves'Impressive...moving...exhilarating' Financial Times'Guo is rebellious, flamboyant and fundamentally optimistic...fascinating' Scotland on Sunday'This stunning memoir picks up where Jung Chang's 1991 bestseller Wild Swans left off...This book will make your jaw drop, then clench in anger' Five stars, Sunday Telegraph'Riveting...Guo is a bolder, angrier and more ambitious figure than her forebears' The TimesXiaolu Guo meets her parents for the first time when she is almost seven. They are strangers to her. When she is born her parents hand her over to a childless peasant couple in the mountains. Aged two, and suffering from malnutrition on a diet of yam leaves, they leave Xiaolu with her illiterate grandparents in a fishing village on the East China Sea. It's a strange beginning.A Wild Swans for a new generation, Once Upon a Time in the East takes Xiaolu from a run-down shack to film school in a rapidly changing Beijing, navigating the everyday peculiarity of modern China: censorship, underground art, Western boyfriends. In 2002 she leaves Beijing on a scholarship to study in Britain. Now, after a decade in Europe, her tale of East to West resonates with the insight that can only come from someone who is both an outsider and at home.Xiaolu Guo's extraordinary memoir is a handbook of life lessons. How to be an artist when censorship kills creativity and the only job you can get is writing bad telenovela scripts. How to be a woman when female babies are regularly drowned at birth and sexual abuse is commonplace. Most poignantly of all: how to love when you've never been shown how.

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Customer Reviews

The opening chapter of this memoir describes the hardscrabble life of Shitang, a rocky, windswept little fishing village on a peninsula at the easternmost reaches of China. As a baby, Xiaolu was given away by her parents to a desperately poor childless couple living up in the mountains. Unable to provide sufficient sustenance for themselves, let alone a toddler, they bring her (now aged two) back down to the village, to live with her grandparents where she remains until the age of seven. Seen through the eyes of a child, the tough life of the tiny port is all she knows. Xiaolu has no knowledge of the outside world – not even the next town – though she does have intense curiosity. A determined and positive little girl, she is quick to find splashes of excitement amidst her pitiful existence: her thrill at meeting a group of art students on the beach, the delight when her stooped, bound-foot grandmother brings her the last remaining drops of a melted ice lolly. While reading, one thought goes through one's mind the entire time: how on earth did Xiaolu Guo get from there to here? Gradually, we find out and it's an extraordinary story of resilience and perseverance. This is an astonishing memoir: remarkably frank and open, distilled with clarity and never self-serving or self-pitying. If there's any justice in the world, this account will rank alongside Jung Chang's Wild Swans as a book that opens eyes as to the real nature of China's innate dichotomies: a state hell-bent on modernity whilst cherry-picking the traditions it chooses to retain, a state manically chasing wealth and superpower status whilst paying lip-service to socialism, a state from whose stultifying censorship Xiaolu Guo could not wait to escape. Footnote: During the time I was reading this book, I watched a television documentary about Christian Dior. The head of the haute couture division described the challenges of seeking out new clients with the new wealth. As the skinny models strutted their stuff down the catwalk, the camera cut to the tiny, terribly select audience and there, in the front row, sat a row of plump Chinese matrons all dolled up to the nines, their faces rigid with de rigueur cosmetic surgery. A snap-shot of the new China that seemed to capture just how fast things have changed.

If you are interested in how China was for most people, outside of the major cosmopolitan areas, especially women, in the 70s and 80s this is the book to read. The portion of the book, which deals with the author's childhood is very readable; especially the recounting of the tragedy of her grandmother's life. As the book progresses it becomes less readable. (In fact I had the impression of two different authors writing the two halves of the book). The author describes in graphic detail her horrifying molestation by a man known to the family, her love affairs (beginning at 14), an abortion and the tasteless experimentation by young artists in Beijing. Such things could have been described in a more circumspect way, so that the book was also suitable for young readers. The reviews compare the book to "Wild Swans"; but, IMHO "Wild Swans" is a far superior, deeper, and more reflective book. The author recounts the events of her life, but apart from her grandmother, the book is not really peopled by three dimensional characters. Memoirs usually take you into the author's world, and acquaint you with the author's inner world, family, friends and acquaintances. Guo's book is practically empty of other people. They are mentioned in passing, but none is described with any sense of reality. So while Guo's childhood recollections are fascinating, all that is recounted from around the age of 12 on is like a newspaper report, factual with no feeling and little reflection. Aspects of the time frame also don't make sense for example, the author states that she had been in London for a decade, before meeting her boyfriend, and then states she has been in London for a decade, when she subsequently meets her boyfriend and becomes pregnant. It is an interesting read, but with the exception of the description of the author's early years, does not give the reader much food for thought. The latter half of the book is more of the so-called "misery memoir" genre, with not a great deal to say.

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