



## The Flowers of War

*Geling Yan , Nicky Harman (Translator)*

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The powerful Chinese novel about love and war on which Zhang Yimou (*Raise the Red Lantern; Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*) has based his latest film starring Christian Bale to be released in 2012.

This moving short novel is based on true events that took place during the Nanjing Massacre in 1937 when the Japanese invaded the Chinese city, slaughtering not only soldiers but raping and murdering the civilian population as well. It tells the story of an American missionary who, for a few terrifying days, finds himself sheltering a group of schoolgirls, prostitutes and wounded Chinese soldiers in the compound of his church.

American priest Father Engelmann is one of the small group of Westerners who have remained in Nanjing, despite the approach of the Japanese. America is not yet in the war and so his church compound is supposedly neutral territory. However, his confidence in his ability to look after the Chinese schoolgirls left in his care is shaken when thirteen prostitutes from the floating brothel on the nearby Yangtze River climb over the compound wall and demand to be hidden. The situation becomes even more intense when some wounded Chinese soldiers appear. Meanwhile Engelmann is becoming increasingly aware of the barbaric behaviour of the Japanese outside the compound walls. It is only a matter of time before they knock on the door and find the people he is protecting.

Like Irène Némirovsky's **Suite Française**, this poignant book looks at the effect upon individuals of large-scale war and tragedy. The characters are beautifully observed. From the naive schoolgirls, the brazen prostitutes and the frightened soldiers to the slightly priggish priest and his resentful Chinese entourage. As the Japanese circle ever closer, the barriers of hatred and prejudice that separate the characters dissolve, and they perform unexpected and moving acts of heroism. Geling Yan, an important Chinese writer, reveals herself to be a master of detail and emotion in this novel. She recreates history as if it is unfolding before our eyes, and writes characters that are so engaging and so rich that we believe in them entirely. This is a novel full of humanity -- at its worst and at its best -- and a fascinating insight into 1930s China.

### The Flowers of War Details

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Author : Geling Yan , Nicky Harman (Translator)

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## Mircalla64 says

i tredici fiori della sfiga cinese materlineare

tratto da una storia realmente accaduta: tredici prostitute rifugiatesi in una missione religiosa a Nanchino durante l'invasione giapponese si sacrificano al posto delle ragazze del coro e vengono sequestrate dai giapponesi

Se non avessi letto milioni di libri di storia cinese e alcuni di questi sul sacco di Nanchino da parte dei giapponesi nel 1937, questo mi sembrerebbe esagerato, ma il fatto è che i giapponesi si sono macchiati di tali nefandezze contro i cinesi all'epoca, che questo libro sembra una favola al confronto dei fatti storici, la narrazione è di quelle stile Harmony cinese, ma il fatto raccontato è agghiacciante: le donne che si offrono in sacrificio si considerano meno di niente, è pur vero che in genere le donne in Cina valgono poco, ma le prostitute non sono considerate neanche umane, e le poverette non hanno un attimo di esitazione e si offrono per salvare la vita alle ragazzine del coro, alcune figlie di facoltosi stranieri e qualche vera orfana...

da vedere anche il film di Zhang Yimou tratto da questa storia "The Flowers of war" (Jin líng shí san chai 2011)

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## Kathy says

The reason I read this novel was for the historical information about the horrific actions of the Japanese army when they overtook the Chinese city of Nanking in 1937. For the background history, I am able to give the book a three-star rating. However, the writing was uninspiring, to say the most. The author was unable to create the relationship to the characters for the reader that grips the heart and mind. The plot was rather clumsily laid out, and the enormity of this historical event was not achieved. As a springboard to other writings about the Japanese occupation of Nanking, this book serves a purpose. As a defining read about the tragic events, it falls way short. I plan on pursuing my reading on the subject with the non-fiction work, The Rape of Nanking.

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## Thoa KÒi says

Ngày giáp T?t mà l?i ??c xong 1 cu?n sách v? chi?n tranh. Không ph?i là ki?u bom ??n ?ánh nhau ?m ? mà theo m?t cách khác. K? chuy?n v? chi?n tranh, v? th?m sát kinh hoàng Nam Kinh d??i góc nhìn ph? n?. Chi?n tranh thì ? ?âu c?ng tàn kh?c dù là n? sinh tr? tu?i hay ph? n? làm ngh? gái ?i?m ?ang s?ng nh? d??i s? ch? che c?a nhà th? Thiên Chúa. Cu?i cùng là s?ng sót m?t cách tàn nh?n hay tàn nh?n ?? s?ng sót, bi ?át r?i có l?i thoát hay tìm l?i thoát qua s? bi ?át. Truy?n hay.

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## **Raisa says**

The Flowers of War is based on a true story; the 1937 Nanking Massacre, when invading Japanese Imperial Army forces killed an estimated 300,000 civilians (this is according to the Chinese. The Japanese maintain the killings were blown out of proportion to incite outrage.) There was also looting and mass rape.

The action in the book is set in a church, where a group of terrified schoolgirls are in hiding from the Japanese forces, unable to get to the 'Safety Zone' where civilians have been told to go. Guarded only by two priests, the church receives more unexpected guests; a group of prostitutes and some wounded Chinese soldiers, who come here for sanctuary.

This tale is soaked in blood, as most stories about war are. I have to say that in terms of writing style the book left something to be desired. Perhaps the detail got lost in translation. Many of the characters felt a bit flat- the schoolgirl protagonist in the first chapter is hardly mentioned and developed as the novel continues, except in the epilogue at the end. She comes across as a rather shallow, sheltered girl overly obsessed with teenage bickering. The attempts to weave in the prostitute's back stories disjointed the flow of the general story as well. The two priest's characters are better developed, but overall this novel seems to suffer from a lack of focus in terms of the characters. Instead, we're encouraged to look at the horror of the events which are unfolding; the fear engendered by the unscrupulous and ruthless Japanese, the hunger and privation faced by the civilians.

Some Goodreads users have said they disliked the prostitutes- I found their characters more likeable than the bickering schoolgirls. Their resilience and courage lifted the book for me, as did the soldiers and their heroism. It is also all the more powerful because it happens to be a true story- even if the veracity of the massacre is being challenged (especially in terms of civilian deaths) there was a war crimes tribunal where civilians testified to the killing and mass rape that took place in the city of Nanking. And though this is fiction, it is likely an approximation of what really did occur in the former capital of China back in 1937. So for once, history which isn't written by the victors.

It's also a good in-between book- short and perfect for carrying around, or for long commutes. But the flaws in style meant that I can't really give it more than three stars.

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## **Tara Chevestt says**

Imagine a church, the attic full of Catholic schoolgirls, the cellar full of whores, and toss a few men in between them to feed them and maintain order...and you get chaos!

What I liked: Tell of the rape of Nanking in a better fashion than Nanjin Requiem did, IMO. Nanjin was far too brutal, like a listing of brutality after brutality... This story, though it rarely left the church walls, told what was going on inside and out. Inside, you got a bunch of ungrateful whores that have bullied their way into the church and expect it to be a 5 star resort and though it wasn't conveyed very well, there are romances flourishing.

And the girls upstairs are dealing with conflicting emotions, growing pains, and petty bickering.

The soldier and his scene at the mass execution... WOW.

What I didn't like: Something was muddled in the translation. Badly. Lots of telling, little showing, and a ton of head hopping. Also came off a bit cold. And I sure did hate those whores.

In the end, it felt like a bunch of selfish people who didn't care that they were endangering other people. And sadly, that seems to be humanity.

Three stars. I got this from netgalley.

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### **Chrissie says**

On completion: No, this was not a total waste of time. This novel is based on real events. It is about what actually happened in December 1937 in an American church which housed Chinese soldiers, prostitutes and 16 naive schoolgirls while the Japanese invaded and massacred all and everyone in Nanjing. The events are gripping. I wanted to know what would happen in the end. Read this book for the plot, NOT for the writing style. Terrible writing. The ~~author~~ or perhaps translator picks all the wrong words.

The audiobook narration by Samantha Quan, is neither exceptionally bad nor good, but when you listen to every word you certainly notice how the words chosen by the ~~author~~ or perhaps translator are completely off. Only read this book to find out about the Nanjing Massacre through a short book of historical fiction. This is not a book to choose if you are looking for good writing. Character development is superficial. Choose it if you want a quick, exciting book tied to real events that took place during the massacre.

Quite possibly the book is better in the original Chinese version.

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I have listened to about half the book. I feel every line irritates me. It is the words chosen by the author that irritate me. The words seem inappropriate, wrong and unsuitable. I'm much pickier about the words an author uses than the plot line. If strange things happen I reason that life is strange, weird things do happen, but if the author throws inappropriate words in my face I get terribly irritated.

So far this book feels like a total waste of time. A huge disappointment.

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### **Diane S ? says**

A more personal yet no less powerful take on the Nanking invasion by the Chinese. School girls, prostitutes, injured Chinese soldiers all come under the protection of an American priest in a church that is supposed to be off limits because of it's American status. The book takes place almost solely within this church and visits by the priest to what is supposed to be the safety zone. The way people change when confronted with adversity, among untold violence, are avidly portrayed in this novel. Sacrifices are made, others learn gratitude and by the end of this book I literally had goosebumps. The epilogue ties it all together and we learn where these people are 9 years later and how some of them had changed. The translation made the book seem distant in the first half or so, but by the end it was a book that delivered a big impact. Historical fiction readers find this book informative. ARC provided by Net Galley.

Read this book several months ago, but cannot get it out of my head. I read so many books but few actually haunt me, this one does so I have added a star and made it a five star read.

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### **DubaiReader says**

A little disappointing.

This was a book that improved a bit as the story progressed - initially I couldn't relax with the dialogue or the points of view of the protagonists, which felt disjointed. I wondered if it was a translation problem, but the translator is very experienced in this field, so I concluded that it must be cultural.

As I relaxed into the style, I became more involved with the schoolgirls in their innocence, the brazen prostitutes and the injured soldiers, all thrown together under the care of the church and Father Engelmann. The Father, with the help of his Deacon, Fabio Adornato, do their best to help everyone but they were in this over their heads, as water and food quickly ran out.

There is mention of the city burning all around but I didn't feel the sense of urgency and panic that this must surely have evoked. There is the smell of burning, but where is the fear that the flames could reach and envelop the church, its buildings and survivors?

The story takes place during the Massacre of Nanking in 1937 and the massacre itself is well described as 5,000 Chinese soldiers unfortunately put their faith in the Japanese to respect their rights as prisoners of war.

It is only a short book with 250 widely spaced pages and I learnt about an historical event that I had not been previously aware of, but I was disappointed that there seemed to be less feeling than I would have expected for a catastrophe of this nature.

Worth a read but not highly recommended.

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### **Lisse says**

I wanted to read this book after watching the movie of the same name, starring Christian Bale. The movie was beautiful, breathtaking and heartbreaking - so completely well done. I believe this might be why I held such high expectations for the book itself. I so rarely think that a movie does a better job of telling a story than the book does, but in many ways in this case I do. I felt like most of what we got from the book was a once-over. Not so much detail or emotion, but more of just a storyline. For me, I would've enjoyed the book more if it had been told from one of the young girl's perspectives or from a combination of three or four - a student, prostitute, priest and soldier's perspectives. Maybe that would've held more of an emotional pull for me. Or maybe seeing the movie first ruined me for the book.

This is a quick read for someone interested in the rape of Nanking, China by the Japanese and what many of the citizens of Nanking lived through (if they indeed lived through that period of time). It's not easy to read; there are disturbing scenes, which is to be expected in a book about war. It gives a glimpse of what different groups of people went through during that period of time and how war changes people in both good and bad ways.

You also get a bit more of a wrap-up of what happened to the different characters at the end of the book, which you don't get in the movie.

## Erin says

Find the enhanced version of this and other reviews at: <http://flashlightcommentary.blogspot....>

I wish I could say I came across this title of my own accord, but I must confess, it was Ni Ni's performance in the film adaptation that prompted me to track down a copy Geling Yan's *The Flowers of War*.

For those whose history is a little rusty, the Nanking (Nanjing) Massacre took place in December 1937. Estimates vary depending on the source, but the International Military Tribunal of the Far East claim more than 200,000 civilians and military personnel lost their lives to the soldiers of the Imperial Japanese Army. It is in my opinion, one of the darkest and oft overlooked chapters of WWII.

I would have been attracted to this piece even if I'd never seen the film. I'd never come across a fictional version of the event and couldn't help being intrigued by the idea once I had. I wanted to see how a writer would treat the event, how they would go about constructing a story from the ashes and sorrow it left in its wake.

In this regard, Yan has real a gift. Her work gives faces to the victims of Nanking and voice to their silent tongues. Through the fiction experiences of Shujuan, Yumo, Hongling, Cardamom, Wang Pusheng, Major Dai, Father Englemann and Fabio, Yan tells the human side of war, weighing emotion and sentiment against the stark reality of history.

*The Flowers of War* is a plainly written piece, but no less moving for its simplicity. In point of fact I found the modest language and style of the piece one of its more attractive qualities not to mention highly appropriate to the rather bleak subject matter.

Finally, I would note that for all the similarity this is not the same story director Yimou Zang tells on film. Be prepared for that and try to judge each format in its own right.

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## Huy says

V?n luôn thích nh?ng cu?n sách vi?t v? chi?n tranh, và ?ây c?ng không ph?i là ngo?i l?.

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## Terri says

*The Flowers of War* is set during the horrific events of the Nanjing Massacre: the 1937 capture of Nanjing - then China's capital - by Japanese forces, who then murdered and raped thousands upon thousands of civilians.

The book tells the story of the efforts of two priests in charge of a Catholic girls' school to protect their young pupils from the invaders by concealing them in the school's attic. Matters are further complicated when first a group of sex workers from a local brothel, then three wounded Chinese soldiers, also seek refuge in the compound.

It's a simply-told and compelling story which carries a lot of emotional weight in its short length. I wished it could have been a little longer; there isn't much time to get to know the characters, although the connections that they do make between them are still intensely moving. The epilogue also feels a little rushed and disparate. Nevertheless, this is a great story about a period of history which must be remembered.

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