



The Binding Chair or, A Visit from the Foot Emancipation Society

Kathryn Harrison

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In poised and elegant prose, Kathryn Harrison weaves in *The Binding Chair; or, A Visit from the Foot Emancipation Society* a stunning story of women, travel, and flight; of love, revenge, and fear; of the search for home and the need to escape it. Set in alluring Shanghai at the turn of the century, *The Binding Chair* intertwines the destinies of a Chinese woman determined to forget her past and a Western girl focused on the promises of the future.

Beautiful, charismatic, destructive, May escapes an arranged marriage in rural nineteenth-century China for life in a Shanghai brothel, where she meets Arthur, an Australian whose philanthropic pursuits lead him into one scrape after another. As a member of the Foot Emancipation Society, Arthur calls on May not for his pleasure but for her rehabilitation, only to find himself immediately and helplessly seduced by the sight of her bound feet. Reforming May is out of the question, so love-struck Arthur marries her instead and brings her home to live with him, his sister and brother-in-law, and their two girls, Alice and Cecily. In Alice, May sees the possibility of redemption: a surrogate for a child she has lost. And it is to May that Alice turns for the love her own mother withholds. But when the twelve-year-old is caught preparing her aunt's opium pipe, she is shipped off to a London boarding school, far from the dangerous influence of the woman who will come to reclaim her and to control the whole family.

The Binding Chair unfolds among scenes of astonishing beauty and cruelty, in a lawless place where traditions and cultures clash, and where tragedy threatens a world built on the banks of unsettled waters--from the bustling Whangpoo River to the lake of blood in the Chinese afterworld. By turns shocking, exquisite, and hilarious, *The Binding Chair* is another spellbinding literary triumph by the writer whose work Michiko Kakutani of *The New York Times* has called "powerful and hypnotic."

The Binding Chair or, A Visit from the Foot Emancipation Society Details

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Author : Kathryn Harrison

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Kathryn Harrison**

From Reader Review The Binding Chair or, A Visit from the Foot Emancipation Society for online ebook

Louise says

I was watching through some of the descriptions of the four binding in this one (and then foolishly got into a lengthy discussion with eldest child about what I'm reading now and foot binding..remove to self, don't Google images ever again).

Although it was a story of a strong Chinese female and all that she endured, I spent a lot of my time being abused by it...May was such a funny character that got into ridiculous situations (especially the trip to fortunums).

To begin with she came across as quite uncaring, but as the story unfolded, and more of her character revealed, I wanted to her more.

Not sure if I find the ending a bit of a cop out.....

Jaye says

Oh, I loved this book! A fascinating, and often disturbing tale of a young Chinese girl who unwillingly has her whole life geared towards marriage, which ultimately results in soul crushing disappointment. After many years of having her life controlled by others, she decides to take her life into her own hands, and abruptly turns the steering wheel in a whole new direction. This decision ultimately leads to finding love, kindness and acceptance, more crushing losses and heart-break. A fascinating and haunting read that will stay in your mind, way after reading the last words.

Kate says

I picked up this book again the other day, and finished it for the second time rather quickly. I had bought the book originally because of my interest in Chinese foot-binding practices, but this is not really a book about foot-binding at all, other than the fact that the main character, May, has bound feet.

Kathryn Harrison's novel winds together so many stories and back stories, that if she were a lesser writer, you would leave this book behind confused. But the characters are so real and vivid and multi-dimensional, that you are quickly drawn in and can't put the book down.

I have read part of Harrison's biographical "The Kiss" but couldn't finish it--perhaps the story of incest was a little too distasteful, but this book is very different and absolutely spell binding. The story takes you to Shanghai, to London, across Siberia, and to Nice on the French Riviera. The words are a delight to read, and the choices each character makes only serve to draw you in deeper to their flaws and human principles.

Kathy Ding says

Oh, goodness, another seemingly Chinese novel with supposedly historic details written by a white woman...

Here's my breakdown of why this book should not be read or bought:

First off, I can understand if a Chinese woman wrote about the life of a certain class of girls set in Shanghai in the 1920's - 1950's. Whenever Westerners write about foot binding, they seem to perpetually assume that it was for all girls in the time period. That simply isn't true at all. Also, not all men were even into that. Any man with any sort of education or was raised in the city did not prefer bound feet at all. I have no idea how accurate the sexual predilections this author wrote about are. Really, it was only very traditional, insular men back in that time period who thought deformed feet were hot. I need to clarify this fact because all the readers who are giving this book a 5-star review think they are learning some historical relevance about China, but really are only glimpsing a small fraction of people who are brought into this practice. I have grandmothers and great grandmothers who were in no danger of ever getting forced into this bound foot business because they lived in the city and were educated. It wasn't common at all in most of the country even in the early 1900's.

This novel's main downfall is that it was written in extremely bad taste. Kathryn Harrison heaps insults upon insults not only about Shanghai, but extends it to the Chinese culture and the Chinese people as a whole. She thinks she is getting away with it because her main protagonist is a Chinese native. However, this character is a grand figment of the author's imagination and has no root in reality or historical context. Instead, May's character serves as the author's own petty, racist, imperialistic (after all she is British) voice. I kid you not, she calls Chinese people less human than white people and instills this irrational hatred into the main character to despise all Chinese men as well since they are animals...

Building upon the main downfall is one that really irked me throughout the entire book. She completely butchers all Chinese words in her novel! It further convinces me that she did no research on what pinyin is and how to romanize Chinese words. She freaking called the Huangpu River the Whangpoo. There's not a single case of any word getting spelled correctly! She's not using the Cantonese spelling or any recognizable spelling. The author most certainly has never heard of Mandarin Chinese. Oy vey. She couldn't even get her main character's name right--Mei, not effing May. And it would have been Meiling or Meili. No one is just named Mei--that's just her vanilla white self assuming things again.

As for the story itself, she should have just focused on the main thread of the bound foot girl, but no, the author extends herself by creating all these unnecessary subplots and characters who nobody cared about. This book gets one star for writing a mildly interesting section about the rubber trade and then a synthetic replacement. The Dick character is definitely the most likable despite that name ;).

Had Kathryn Harrison read anything remotely historically Chinese, she would have learned that the real foot emancipationist was Mao Ze Dong. It was communism that abolished foot binding, multiple wives practice and many degrading female practices that stemmed from Confucianism. Jesus, just talk to a real Chinese person!

This ain't The Good Earth, that's for sure, but I really expected something more intelligent. Pearl S. Buck was a legit white lady who wrote about Chinese culture.

Katie Lowry says

I really liked it *while* reading it, but toward the end, I had a sinking feeling that nothing would come together. I was right. There were some great sentences, which is a big part of the reason I gave it as many stars as I did, and a few killer images, but I felt like there was no heart. No one to love. The characters were

very 2 dimensional :(I know I just lost all my library-cred by using an emoticon, but that's how I felt. I wanted it to be great; it was only good.

Babs says

I really struggled to read this book and didn't enjoy the experience. I love reading books about or set in China, whether factual or fictional, so I think this book came as a double disappointment.

Harrison has created a book which is just overflowing with characters. The main characters number 16 (May, her father, mother & grandmother, nieces Alice and Cecliy, her husband Arthur, his sister Dolly and her husband Dick, the childrens' governesses Miss Waters and Miss Clusburton, not to mention Captain Litovsky, Suzanne Petrovna and Evlanoff and Agnes and Rose) with a supporting cast of as many if not more. The story is also set along multiple time-lines in both May's life and that of her niece, Alice. As such the story jumps around from year to year - but not in chronological order. Unfortunately Harrison is not skilled enough as a writer to either be able to handle the cast of thousands she has created, nor keep the story flowing well enough over the different time periods, and I found myself struggling to follow what was happening. Had this book been written in chronological order, with fewer key characters, I think this could have been a good read. As it is the book ends up being shallow, confusing and disjointed. Characters seem to take key decisions in their lives without the reader being aware of what has prompted them to do so, and in the end it's just a guddle of stories (reading almost like a collection of short stories by the same author).

Unfortunatley Harrison has now made it on to my "never to be read again" author list.

Levanah says

A) To Jeremy J. Green (August, '09, comment):

Jeremy -

Before I give you my gut reaction, let me ask what you were thinking when you wrote this.

There. Now I've asked.

Let's see: break a baby girl's feet in half, bind them to fester and ooze and cripple her for the rest of her life so that she is incapable of ever again running or dancing or even walking properly, and condemn her to excruciating pain until she dies....

This is a *style* - like short hair or long skirts or plaid ties???

I am astonished that anyone on this site would post such a hurtful and offensive comment.

B) Although sometimes difficult to read, this was an astounding book. Its range, its multi-cultural and multi-

generational explorations, its haunting and magical portrayals - all lingered long with me after I completed this work. I believe that I have been changed in some ways from reading it, though I'm not sure I could put into words exactly how, and isn't this, after all, one of the best recommendations for any good read?!

Nelson says

A beautiful narrative about broken people (are there any other kind the novel seems to ask?): May's feet, Arthur's tinnitus, Dolly's madness, Eleanor's crippling lisp, the list goes on and on. It's almost as if the novel is a book-length illustration of Hemingway's nostrum "The world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong at the broken places." Harrison is a lovely novelist, with style and confidence to burn. The narrative is told in two alternating sequences, roughly (past and present), which makes perfect sense over time, because ultimately the book is about how past choices inform some present actions. Harrison is too smart a writer, however, to think the past explains the present fully. Over and over, her novel demonstrates that some of our actions are irreducible and unknowable and inexplicable, most of all to ourselves. Loosely speaking, the story is the life of a Chinese woman subject to the practice of foot-binding. Don't read this book for some in-depth explanation for the practice however. It's not a history, it's a novel, and it tells the story of the protagonist May's life. She is much more than the product of footbinding, though to be sure, that crippling practice has ramifications for the lives of everyone she touches in her story. Harrison is a beguiling stylist and renders many moments indelibly, so that this story--which contains much cruelty and inhumanity--is nevertheless a thing of lasting beauty.

ToniS says

This book had been sitting on my bookshelf for at least 10 years. I can't remember why I bought it in the first place, or why I never picked it up until now.

It's not at all what I expected it to be from the title. Much less an exploration of footbinding than say, Snow Flower and the Secret Fan, which I read recently. Footbinding is really just a metaphor the author uses as a device to delve into all the ways women are controlled through various societal, mental and physical restraints.

I'm guessing that the visceral scenes the author uses are meant to be an assault on the reader's own expectations and sense of what is proper. Some of it is really quite shocking and disturbing. It took me until about halfway through the book to see that it wasn't just gratuitous.

The language itself is gorgeous. Lots of period details. The characters are complicated and fabulously interesting. And the structure of the book with its flashbacks and forwards held my attention.

Overall, it was a much richer read than I was expecting. And I'm curious about the author's other books now.

Kassidy harris says

While this could have been really interesting because of the cultural setting of the story, the writing seemed to jump from timeframe to timeframe without any good transition. It totally distracted me from the characters, all of whom I felt I knew only a little bit better by the end than I did at the beginning. That said, it was good enough that I actually made it to the end, but that's not saying much.

Petra X says

The hook was the title - perhaps a glimpse into the secret world of Chinese culture in times not too long gone by. The protagonist with her tiny feet and huge greed was quite a fascinating character, but when the focus changed to her extremely boring niece going to school it seemed the author had run out of steam and the book died for me. I tried several times to get back into it, but in the end, despite the pretty cover looking at me from the bedside table, gave it up.

JackieB says

This didn't quite work for me. The author seemed to be exploring the restricted lives open to women in various cultures in the early part of the 20th century. However, she was trying too hard for my taste. There was no contrast. Even the youngest women in the book seemed to be unhappy and trapped. I think a few counter examples would have kept my interest and made me think more about her theme. She also relied on sex or sexual experiences too much to try to make her points. It all got a bit predictable and tedious.

Cindy says

What a fascinating book! I could not put it down even though many, many parts were very disturbing and tragic. The title is also misleading. Foot binding is included but it is not the main theme of the book. The story takes place mostly in Shanghai where we follow the lives of Alice who is Caucasian and is focused on the future and her Aunt Mae who is a footbound Chinese courtesan who is determined to forget her past. This is one book i will never forget. Very haunting. I highly recommend it.

Erica says

I thought this book was going to teach me about what it was like for girls in China who used to bind their feet for beauty. I thought it would explain how this concept came into being, and why it was carried on for generations, and what brought about its eventual decline. I thought I'd get an insight into one of the oldest countries in the world. Boy was I wrong. I should have suspected that an author named 'Kathryn Harrison' might not be of Chinese decent, but I foolishly gave her the benefit of the doubt. Instead of an insightful look into an ancient culture, I got a narrative that switched between a cranky Chinese lady with bound feet, to her Russian niece and her adventures. Not to mention that each chapter was a different time period and you never knew which character you'd be focusing on. Don't read this book. What a waste of time.

Meghan says

I enjoyed this book, and in some respects better than say Snow Flower and the Secret Fan. The foot binding process was just as vivid but it delved into more of how it effected women. Plus, being in Shanghai right now, it was interesting to picture this city at the turn of the 20th century.

My only "complaint" was that the main character was Chinese and this was written by a British caucasian. If you've read any "real" chinese stories, I just felt that May would never had made that decision at the end. It felt tragic for tragedy's sake and not true to the character. For that reason, I couldn't give this one a fourth star.

But I would recommend it for those who may want to know a bit about what China was like a century ago.

Odette Longo says

You either love this book... or hate it. I loved this fascinating story. Found the subject of foot binding fascinating. No need to delve into every line seeking historical correctness and at no point did I feel that the author cast some dark shadow over China, its culture or it's people, towards whom I have the utmost respect. I was caught up and swept away to another age, another era, another life while reading this book. If you come across this book, keep an open mind and enjoy the tale.

Saleh MoonWalker says

Onvan : The Binding Chair or, A Visit from the Foot Emancipation Society - Nevisande : Kathryn Harrison - ISBN : 60934425 - ISBN13 : 9780060934422 - Dar 336 Safhe - Saal e Chap : 2000

Christine says

An interesting parallel between "old" China and "new" China. The characters struggle with who they are and their "station" in life. The book jumps between stories and throughout the timeline. The writing was interesting, but just a little too much sexual content for my taste. The Binding Chair didn't add much to my knowledge of this time period. The ending of the book left me feeling empty and sort of wishing I'd never read the book at all.

Siv30 says

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Laura says

I was excited to read it, but quickly put it down with all the disgusting things that happened. I'm not talking about foot-binding, either, I'm talking about things like a man liking to insert his wife's foot into his anus. Despite my interest in China and some of its customs, this was not something I wanted to read.
