



Gold Boy, Emerald Girl

Yiyun Li

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In these spellbinding stories, Yiyun Li, Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award winner and acclaimed author of *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers* and *The Vagrants*, gives us exquisite fiction filled with suspense, depth, and beauty, in which history, politics, and folklore magnificently illuminate the human condition.

In the title story, a professor introduces her middle-aged son to a favorite student, unaware of the student's true affections. In "A Man Like Him," a lifelong bachelor finds kinship with a man wrongly accused of an indiscretion. In "The Proprietress," a reporter from Shanghai travels to a small town to write an article about the local prison, only to discover a far more intriguing story involving a shopkeeper who offers refuge to the wives and children of inmates. In "House Fire," a young man who suspects his father of sleeping with the young man's wife seeks the help of a detective agency run by a group of feisty old women.

Written in lyrical prose and with stunning honesty, *Gold Boy, Emerald Girl* reveals worlds strange and familiar, and cultures both traditional and modern, to create a mesmerizing and vibrant landscape of life.

Gold Boy, Emerald Girl Details

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Author : Yiyun Li

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From Reader Review Gold Boy, Emerald Girl for online ebook

George says

SUBTLE AMBIGUITIES.

"As innocent as new blossoms, unaware of the time sweeping past like a river."—page 134

Subtlety and futility seem to suffuse the eight short stories of Yiyun Li's nuanced collection, GOLDEN BOY, EMERALD GIRL.

Recommendation: Not a comfortable read for the linear-minded (nothing ever seems to be resolved), but poetically lyrical if you can abide a touch of ambiguity.

"The one to show up at the right time beats the earlier risers."—page 135

"But animosity is easier to live with than sympathy, and indifference leaves less damage in the long run"—page 42

NOOKbook edition, 174 pages.

Cynthia says

A Unique Voice

The first story, 'Kindness', is about a young girl serving her required army stint the year before starting college. She's led an isolated childhood as an only child of a depressed, unengaged mother and a loving but much older and more tired father who works as a janitor. The child has an odd talent for gaining the interest of influential people such as an aging, lonely literary woman who teaches her to read and appreciate English literature including Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy and D.H. Lawrence. In the army her commanding officer attempts to form a close relationship with her but our protagonist eludes her and though the girl is an expert observer of the other soldiers around her she holds herself separate. The story is told at a distance from the stance of the middle aged teacher the girl becomes. As an adult she continues her solitary sojourn with her deft people watching skills. She has a longing to be a part of other's lives but an even stronger longing to remain separate where she feels safe and free to observe.

In 'A Man like Him' a retired art teacher spends his days caring for his elderly widowed mother. He has no companions in his old age except his internet chat room friends. He hires a woman to sit with his mother and slinks off to the corner internet café sitting among young giggling, courting kids. On one site he encounters a bitter young female blogger whose story gets under his skin so much that he steps out from behind his keyboard to confront his feelings. The blogger is obsessed with letting everyone know how badly her father has treated her and her mother through his infidelity and desertion. The art teacher feels an affinity with the slandered father. He reaches out to the blogger's victim and they meet in person but it only gets sadder when he comes out from behind his protective computer screen. There's something dark and tragic and inevitable in his story.

One of the most affective stories was about a Chinese couple who immigrate to the US they have successful careers and a child. They're happy until the daughter is killed in a horrible car accident right before she graduates from high school. The middle aged couple decides to have a biological child by implanting their embryo into a surrogate. They decide the wife will go back to China, find a surrogate and stay with her until their child is born. Of course nothing is quite that easy. The surrogate has a tragic past of her own and dreams of a better future life. The wife and the surrogate get closer than they'd planned.

There is a pervading sadness in all Li's stories but they also have a stark beauty. All emotions are kept in a tight box and the tension comes with the reader's fear and even desire that all heck is about to break loose. I felt like I'd been given a glimpse in to a uniquely Chinese point of view but at the same time it felt universal. I'm not sure how she achieved this seeming contradiction but I came away feeling emotionally richer.

Judy says

This is one of those books that I couldn't point a finger at and say "This was wrong, that was wrong, I didn't like this..." because it was well-written, the plots and topic was good, but I simply struggled through the stories because they were all so darn depressing....But I guess when loneliness is the theme of the book that should be expected! However, can't a lonely person have *something* good happen once in a while?

Cecily says

This is an 80 page novella and 8 short stories, all concerning lonely people, and mostly set in present day China.

The final line of the book, and of the eponymous story, sums them all up, "They were lonely and sad people... and they would not make one another less sad, but they could, with great care, make a world that would accommodate their loneliness", and that glimmer of hope is what ensure this is not a depressing collection.

KINDNESS

The novella is about a 40 year old single woman in Beijing, alternating between her young adulthood (including a stint in the army) and her present life as a teacher of maths - despite her love of literature. In fact this is one of three stories in the collection that has a character who loves Dickens. The elderly neighbour who triggers this interest has some similarities with Miss Havisham in Great Expectation and seems to treat Muyan as an Estella figure. She believes that without love, one can be free and tells her, "The moment you admit someone into your heart, you make yourself a fool" and "Love leaves one in debt... best if you can start free from all that". Muyan thinks she has never experienced love and yet reading her account of her life, the reader is likely to think otherwise.

A MAN LIKE HIM

This is about a bachelor and retired teacher, living with his aged and ailing mother. It explores the enduring ramifications of public accusations, and the bond they can create.

PRISON

This was the weakest story, because I found too much of it implausible. It concerns a Chinese American couple who, when their teenage daughter dies, return to China in search of a surrogate, even though it's the woman's eggs, rather than womb that are the problem.

Aphorisms on the general theme include the observation that at a funeral "one has to repeat words of condolence to irrelevant people"; "animosity is easier to live with than sympathy, and indifference leaves less damage in the long run"; "It is our nature to make a heaven out of places to which we can never return";

THE PROPRIETRESS

She is an oldish shop keeper who takes in needy women and children to help them start new lives. It fell a little flat at the end.

HOUSE FIRE

This is the most amusing. A group of retired old women set up a detective agency to investigate alleged affairs, as part of a moral crusade. The different backgrounds and personalities of each woman are carefully and interestingly contrasted, including "the most harmlessly nosy person one could meet in life, [who] seemed to have a talent for turning even the most offensive question into an invitation" [to talk].

NUMBER 3, GARDEN ROAD

A simple will they/won't they story of two lonely neighbours.

SWEEPING PAST

Focused on teenagers. An old widow reminisces to her 14 year old granddaughter about her two "sworn sisters" (a bond made when they were ~13) and the tragedy that tore them apart when their own children were teenagers.

SOUVENIR

About a harmless old man, with stalkerish tendencies.

GOLD BOY, EMERALD GIRL

About a single woman raised by a single father who befriends her older female tutor. The tutor tries to set her up with her own son, whom she raised alone.

Overall, they are good stories, well written, with a running theme. However, there are two slightly weaker ones, so that overall I don't think it as good as her previous collection, *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers*.

Jan-Maat says

This is a collection of short stories set in China but written in English for an English speaking readership. They are all fine enough stories technically but for me something was missing, it was a bit like sitting on a bench in autumn watching the leaves fall from the trees, sometimes you are in the mood for it and sometimes not. So I find myself in the position of writing that the stories are all capable, coherent and consistent but that I would not particularly recommend them, and I don't expect to remember them or have any hankering to return to them to read again.

The stories are set in China, they are contemporary-ish, the narration or reminiscences of characters roll back

in time as far as the 1920s. The first story I felt made the strongest impression, but then it was the longest too, so that may be the simple effect of spending so long with one character and in her mind.

This is a collection with common themes, loneliness, isolation and marginal figures (the elderly, the retired, emigrants, failed relationships, adopted people, the chronically disappointed), but it is not a particularly miserable collection, far from it, the stories all treat their characters in a dignified way - this is even achieved cleverly in the tale of the man who suspects that his father and wife are having an affair by moving the viewpoint to the elderly women hearing the husband's fears and their reaction to it, there is a persistent air of acceptance and resignation, but a resignation that has a certain nobility to it even though the author doesn't hint at the philosophy or belief that may support or have shaped the characters to carry their burdens in the way that they do. By implication this is simply the essence of being Chinese, and not by implication the American way. It is very much a vision of China packaged for western eyes - for instance children are dutiful and care for elderly parents without a second thought, one would not guess from such stories that the Chinese government passed a law to mandate that children do so.

Read and release.

Teresa says

4 and 1/2 stars

Nuggets and gems (in keeping with the title of this collection) are scattered throughout these stories -- in some it is the culminating line; in others a sentence that at first glance seems like a throwaway. Though the stories are set in China, these are more stories of character, not place, though the changes from an 'old' to a 'new' China and the resulting transitions do inform them.

The opening novella, "Kindness" -- the only story told in the first person -- sets the tone for the characters in the rest of the stories, all populated with lonely, prickly people trying to make a connection with others, though many of them would deny that is what they are doing, even insisting that they are self-sufficient in their aloneness.

My favorite story may be "Number Three, Garden Road" -- about a woman who, 45 years after developing a crush on a 24-year-old man when she was 10, returns to the building they both lived in. "The Proprietress," who bossily houses the wives and girlfriends of executed men and condemned prisoners in the prison across from her shop, is another unforgettable character: you will be surprised at the motivation for her altruistic actions.

Though Dickens is referenced as reading material for two of the characters in two different stories, I couldn't help thinking of E.M. Forster in regard to the themes.

Leslie Reese says

When I began reading these nine stories, I thought: "I can't really like this book; it's going to be woeful, and I need something to uplift my spirits." I am glad I continued to read. Because the writing was honest and well-crafted, I steadily grew fond and respectful of the ensemble of plain, sorrowful, seemingly unheroic people

whose stories are told.

You know the sensation of taking a well-deserved vacation that is too short?---the way it takes a few days to get the hang of no longer obeying your usual routine/and just when you're getting the hang of enjoying your liberation, it is time to return to your daily grind? That's how this book hit me. I was under its spell and wished for another two days worth of characters and their stories to absorb.

Leseparatist says

Ok?adka porównuje proz? Yiyun Li do Nabokowa i Czechowa, ale spokojnie wida? tu te? podobie?stwa do opowiada? Alice Munro. ?wiaty zamieszkiwane przez postaci s? pe?ne niedopowiedzie?, niespe?nionych nami?tno?ci (albo i ?y?) i kompromisów. Cz??ci tekstów brakowa?o - w moim odczuciu - tego ostatecznego sznytu, zgrabnej pointy (lub braku pointy) jak to u Munro, które tak zupe?nie do mnie trafia, ale nawet bez tej doskona?o?ci, sporo tekstów czyta?o si? znakomicie. Niemniej jednak, niezmiernie ciekawe winiety dotycz?ce mieszka?ców Chin i osadzone w czasie i miejscu.

(J?zyk troch? wydawa? mi si? miejscami niezgrabny, by? mo?e z winy t?umaczenia, a mo?e po prostu proza trudno przek?adalna; za to idiosynkratycznie nieregularne i cz?ste zmiany perspektywy bardzo do mnie z jakiego? powodu trafi?y).

(Ulubione teksty: Dobro?, P?on?cy dom i tytu?owe opowiadanie.)

Olivia says

I think this is the book I have enjoyed reading the most this year, and it is also one of the best books I have read this year, in terms of opening a new world open to me. I have read several other Chinese authors, but this is probably my favorite. I felt that the characters were both universal and specific, and that the book was a strong insight into "real" (although it is fiction), human lives in China... and would be interested to know of course what people who know more about real life in China think. My praise is not necessarily in her crafting of sympathetic characters. The characters are well crafted and complicated figures, but you do not really "sympathize" in any serious way. But their lives are interesting, and I wanted to read more.

I realize that nothing about this review is really explaining why I liked it so much. I just did. Bleak, inspiring writing, if those words can go together. I guess to me, the best way to sum it up is the last quote I liked, the last line of the book (don't worry - not really a spoiler):

"They were lonely and sad people, all three of them, and they would not make one another less sad, but they could, with great care, make a world that would accommodate their loneliness." (162)

--- QUOTES ---

"It is a terrible thing, even for an indifferent person like me, to see the bleakness lurking in someone else's life." (6)

"I have learned, since then, that life is like that, each day ending up like a chick refusing to be returned to the eggshell." (7)

"I had learned that if one remained unresponsive in those situations one could become transparent; when my mother's eyes peeled off my clothes piece by piece they would meet nothing underneath but air." (8)

"People who think they know their own stories do not appreciate other people's mysteries, Professor Shan explained; that is why people like you and me will always find each other." (14)

"I waved back once, thinking perhaps we were the loneliest family in the world because we were meant to be that way." (40)

"Never would I have a more memorable time than the month I spent in the mountains, though I wonder, when I say this, if it appears so only because it is our nature to make a heaven out of places we can never return." (43)

"There are people, I now know, who have been granted happiness as their birthright, and who, believing that every mystery in life can be solved and every pain salved, reach out with a savior's hand." (49)

"the loneliness I had learned to live with all of a sudden unbearable. I did not know the driver's name, nor had I gotten a close look at his face -- but for years to come I would think of his salute, a stranger's kindness always remembered because a stranger's kindness, like time itself, heals our wounds in the end." (53)

"Professor Shan must have suspected all this talk but, as always, she refused to let the mundane into her flat. Instead, we read other people's stories, more real than our own; after all, inadequate makers of our own lives, we were not match for those masters. ... My mother fell in love at an early age, my father late; they both fell for someone who would not return their love, yet in the end their story is the only love story I can claim, and I live as proof of that story, of one man's offering to a woman from is meager existence, and of her returning it with her entire adult life." (55-56)

"One day, if they were fortunate enough to survive all the disappointments life had in store for them, they would have to settle into their no longer young bodies." (63)

"'One should never hope for the unseeing to see the truth,' Teacher Fei said now." (72)

"Perhaps that was what they needed, the unhurried life of a dormant town, where big tragedies and small losses could all be part of a timeless dream." (78)

"The world was intolerant of men with sensitive hearts, but how many people would bother to look deeper into their souls, lonely for unspeakable reasons?" (117)

"The first time Meilan watched a hundred old people slow-dance to the song, she was overwhelmed by a bleakness that she had never known existed." (124)

"An old donkey who loved to chew on the fresh grass, they must have been saying behind his back. He'd better watch out for his stomach, some of them would perhaps say, but they forgot it was the heart that would kill a man; a man never died from indigestion." (127)

"Perhaps she blended in with the furniture well, but even a piece of good furniture might save someone's life

by miracle." (146)

"... although she knew it was not the students that his mother missed but the white skulls of mammals and birds on her office shelves, the drawers filled with scalpels and clamps and tweezers that she had cleaned and maintained with care, and the fact that she could mask her indifference to the human species with her devotion to animals." (149)

"Freedom is like restaurant food, he once told an old friend in the States, and one can lose one's appetite for even the best restaurants." (152)

"There were snapshots of him when he had first arrived in America, with his bright-colored T-shirt, long and flying hair, and broad smile, as picturesque and unreal as the Statue of Liberty in the background." (154)

"They were lonely and sad people, all three of them, and they would not make one another less sad, but they could, with great care, make a world that would accommodate their loneliness." (162)

Faye says

Read: April 2018

Kindness - 5/5 stars

A Man Like Him - 3.5/5 stars

Prison - 3/5 stars

The Proprietress - 3.5/5 stars

House Fire - 4/5 stars

Number Three, Garden Road - 3/5 stars

Sweeping Past - 4/5 stars

Souvenir - 2/5 stars

Gold Boy, Emerald Girl - 4/5 stars

Edward Rathke says

This is one of the loneliest collections of stories I've ever read. It's also remarkably beautiful, if only because it manages to never fall into despair. The will to go on, to keep living, even when all love is gone, even after realising that love was only a word one never could believe in or that one could no longer believe in. But there is so much more here than that.

--I never showed up in her dreams, I am certain, as people we keep in our memories rarely have a place for us in theirs. You may say that we too evict people from our hearts while we continue living in theirs, and that may very well be true for some people, but I wonder if I am an anomaly in that respect. I have never forgotten a person who has come into my life, and perhaps it is for that reason I cannot have much of a life myself. The people I carry with me have lived out not only their own rations but mine too, though they are innocent usurpers of my life, and I have only myself to blame.--

--In one of these revelatory moments she could have said, Moyan, you were not born to us; we only picked

you up from a garbage dump--but no, my mother had never, even in her most uncharitable moment, said that to me, and in fact she kept the secret until her death, and for that alone I loved her, and love her still.--

--But animosity is easier to live with than sympathy and indifference leaves less damage in the long run.--

All from the first story in the collection and it sets the tone for the rest. But, maybe most important about these, is that this sentence lies within as well:

--I wished this life could go on forever.--

And I think, with that, this following sentence contain the whole of the book:

--One's fate is determined by what she is not allowed to have, rather than what she possesses--

There is so much sadness here, but none of the characters give up. They are women battered in the many ways that life can ravage a person. Many of them are old or ageing, stepping through middle age or closer to the grave, and all of them have felt life go by, with its many regrets, its many battles, its endless wars, and I think, too, that it's fitting that much of the first story in the collection takes place during military service.

Though it's sad and lonesome, it manages to not destroy you, crush you under its weight. For this is a book that weighs heavy on the heart and may break one, if you have one to break, but there's this stillness within them, this calming poise, where, even though the world is falling apart or was falling apart or has fallen apart, one can still breath and take that next step, wake up to that next unlikely dawn.

There is a strong sense of fatality, too, as in the first line of the story that the collection takes its name from:

--He was raised by his mother alone, as she was by her father.--

That sense of fatality is the current beneath the surface of these stories, where the generational gaps of Chinese society meet and react with one another, where the elders cannot understand the youth and the youth do not even care.

It's a great collection, though at times a bit slow and less engaging, and some of the stories miss more than others. They attempt to lighten the mood, I think, but never go far enough, so they tend to wallow more, are somehow less direct and feel maybe out of place.

Anycase, I recommend it.

Pickle Farmer says

I enjoyed the short stories in this book. I thought it was interesting how all of them involved an older character who was nostalgic or regretful about their past in some way. I like Yiyun Li's writing style. I like the simplicity of her sentences (like when one character compares freedom to a restaurant you get tired of eating at), or how violence always pops up in her plots in ways that really shock you. I like how most of her characters are lonely. Her stories are sad, but somehow not depressing. I read this book (almost) straight through over a period of two days. Not even the blaring Superbowl could interrupt me--I even had to keep my index finger on the page to keep track of where I was at times! (So many car commercials... aah!)

Joanna Luloff says

This is a beautifully quiet and restrained collection of stories. Many of them deal with loneliness (often stubbornly self-imposed) as a way to maintain a sense of self. There is nothing showy about these stories, but at the end of almost every one, I wanted to flip back to the beginning and start again to see how they had managed to build up so much psychological punch and complexity. The final story (and title story) is stunning.

Saleh MoonWalker says

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Kamalia Ramlan says

4.5 bintang.

ada sembilan buah cerita (novela/cerpen) dalam buku ini dengan pelbagai konflik manusia. Namun, aku membacanya dengan penuh ketenangan dek kerana langgam bahasanya yang juga tenang. Watak, perwatakan dan latar cerita diterangkan dengan terperinci namun masih tidak serabut.
