



## **Repeat After Me**

*Rachel DeWoskin*

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Rachel DeWoskin is a writer who has been lauded for her "razor-sharp descriptions" (The Wall Street Journal), her "considerable cultural and linguistic resources" (The New Yorker), and her rare ability to offer a "real insider's look at life in modern China" (The Economist). Now DeWoskin, author of the laughout-loud funny and poignant Foreign Babes in Beijing, returns with a new novel about modern China and one American girl's struggle to find herself there.

Aysha is a twenty-two-year-old New Yorker putting the pieces of her life back in place after her parents' divorce and her own nervous breakdown when a young Chinese student named Da Ge flips her world upside-down. In a love story that spans decades and continents, from the Tiananmen Square incident to 9/11, New York City's Upper West Side to the terraced mountains of South China, Repeat After Me gives readers an alternately funny and painful glimpse of life and loss in between languages.

## Repeat After Me Details

Date : Published May 14th 2009 by Harry N. Abrams (first published May 1st 2009)

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Author : Rachel DeWoskin

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## From Reader Review Repeat After Me for online ebook

### Growlcat says

Great story about two damaged people who meet and make a connection, despite cultural differences. Not a happy story, but not a sad one either.

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### Elevate Difference says

Rachel DeWoskin's debut novel, *Repeat After Me*, is a cultural love story between two people whose lives briefly intertwine. Afterwards, they are never the same again. The story follows the relationship between a young neurotic ESL teacher in Manhattan, Aysha Silvermintz, and her student, Da Ge, a mysterious, silent, Chinese national who comes to the U.S. just after the Tienanmen Square uprisings.

Whatever they may lack in communication skills, they compensate for in emotional understanding. Both come from difficult families and have personal baggage to deal with. The day Da Ge walks into Aysha's classroom, Aysha begins to fall in love with him. After they spend time together, Da Ge abruptly asks Aysha to marry him so he can obtain his U.S. citizenship. When Aysha becomes pregnant, she does not tell Da Ge right away because she is not sure how he will react. Sometimes, he is distant from her, while other times, he is emotionally close. He also spends days away from the apartment without telling her where has been and she does not question him. He only says he has 'business.'

Da Ge married her for citizenship. But, Aysha married him for more. She married for love and his ideals. The tension of what this arrangement entailed constantly lingered in their interactions. Then, one day Da Ge takes off again and after a few days, Aysha finally goes looking for him. She finds that he has committed suicide. To make sense of his life and death, she moves to China to deliver and raise her child.

DeWoskin writes her novel in a multicultural narrative which immediately captivates a reader's attention. Her writing is emotional, graceful, and provocative filled with beautiful, sometimes painful images. But her story is always focused on the human spirit. The characters she portrays are seekers trying to find answers in the world, trying to follow a path, and find peace. The torment in Da Ge was too great. He was a child of Tiananmen Square. His continuous teachings to Aysha of China, both of its past and present, illustrate his internal struggle of wanting a democracy in China. The physical bruises and scars are manifestations of his fight with the powers that be. His willingness to learn English and his inability to survive in new culture surface a wounded soul. Aysha needed to go to China to discover a peace for herself. She had to now practice Da Ge's teachings. After years of living alone, she now would become a nurturer to her child. She wanted to be as close as possible to Da Ge's spirit as possible with all the tastes, smells, culture, and reminders. This would be her salvation.

DeWoskin's novel is character-driven and sophisticated, but does not lack in plot. She vividly describes her characters' moods, expressions, habits, and desires without giving too much away. Readers will not get bored. She gives her readers enough information so they will care about her characters. She engages them to read on. This is a rare talent. The story is also one which is bittersweet, and is told with raw honesty.

Review by Mona Lisa Safai

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### **Christel says**

I love Repeat After Me and not just because I speak Chinese, studied in China in the late 90's, and seriously adored Foreign Babes in Beijing. I love it because DeWoskin shows so much restraint in her writing and has such a deep respect for her characters. This book crosses cultures, an ocean, and most importantly relationships. It speaks to the human condition and how we all struggle to understand our loved ones on a deep and intimate level and yet always seem to come up short. Repeat After Me is the kind of book where the characters truly come alive. I keep expecting to run into Aysha on the streets of New York. I also find myself wondering how a certain bilingual character (don't want to spoil anything here) is getting along in China and what the future holds for her. You pretty much know how this book is going to end from the very beginning, but the author's attention to detail and your involvement with the characters keeps you reading---even through the late night hours.

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### **Amy says**

I liked this book and it was interesting how she went back and forth between New York and Beijing. I thought some of the details about China were really perceptive and things you almost don't notice, so it was nice to see them detailed out in the book - I can't ride my bike down the sidewalk here in Shanghai now without thinking of her line ..the clinking of the sidewalk tiles as the wheels rolled... If I had read that in the US I would have just skipped over it without it really registering. The only think about the book was that it was hard to really know what made Da Ge tick, it was always just her perception of him.. I would have liked to have heard his voice besides just from his letters.

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### **bookczuk says**

I had not gone looking for this book, nor was it an author I knew. However, the book didn't exactly beckon me from the shelf where I was looking for a book by another author. More like it threw a shoe at my head to get my attention.

Well written, well paced, interesting planning and layout of a debut novel. There were so many aspects of this novel that I found intriguing: the merging of cultures, learning another language to actually speak, not just as an academic exercise, immigration, Tienanmen square, love, grief, loss, mental instability, family.

At its root, this is the story of two individuals who meet and interact briefly, and that interaction changes their lives completely. Made me think of that butterfly flapping its wings in Brazil setting off a tornado in Texas.

Equally fascinating was the blurb about the author on the inside jacket cover:

Rachel De Woskin was educated at Columbia and Boston University. In 1994, she moved to Beijing, where she worked in public relations before taking a starring role in a hugely successful Chinese soap opera, Her acclaimed memoir, *Foreign Babes in Beijing* has been published in five languages and is currently being developed as a feature film. She lives in New

York with her husband and two children.

One to watch.

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### **Liza Gilbert says**

This is a lovely book that reminds me somewhat of Barbara Hall's The Music Teacher. The female protagonist is an ESL teacher in New York during Nixon's presidency. She teaches predominantly Chinese immigrants. She falls in love with one of these immigrants, who, the foreshadowing explains, disappears or dies at the end of the book, which is why she is writing it. The book is quiet, and the action is more on the end of correcting verb tenses and talking about cultural differences.

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### **Betsy Magdaleno says**

I would recommend this book to all the native people that don't speak English as their first language. My favorite character in the book was Aysha because she is a lot like me. One she can never make up her mind and two she also likes Asian people. She also likes to go and tell her best friend everything and all of her problems that she has. My least favorite character is Da Ge I did not like him because he was a really rude person and he does not care how other people feel. The author wrote this book because she remembered that she was once going to do a Japanese opera show so she decided to do a book about Japanese people coming to America. The portion that most captivated my attention was on the summary that the book has because it said something about Asian people, and I like to hang out with a lot of Asian people. What kept me reading this book were the words that the author mentioned and those words were: Asia, Japanese, and other words that are alike to these words. I was able to predict the ending of the book because it gave me a lot of clues about what was going to happen. If this book was made into movie, I would choose a lot of my friends to play the characters because the book has a lot of native people and many of my friends are native speakers. The emotions that this book made me feel were sadness because Aysha was not able to tell the guy that she liked him, and happiness. My favorite line from the book was "Maybe Da Ge knew more than I did about what would happen to us."

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### **Ellie says**

A moving, sparkling book. Maybe it's because I know the author, and could hear her voice in the book, but I was deeply moved by it. Her text has genuine, searing insight and the combination of multiple cultures and generations is beautiful. It also got me interested in learning more about Chinese culture, and Tang poetry.

Anyone who has ever lived abroad, or even known someone from a very different culture, can especially appreciate many things about this book, aside from the pure plot points. One of my favorite humorous parts is when the main character doesn't know the word for "doorknob" in Chinese, because it reminds me of trying to buy a hole puncher when I lived in Paris. I ended up asking the man at the stationery store for "the thing that makes the holes in the paper"!

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### **Angela says**

An interesting and, I think, still rare account of how a younger Chinese generation grapples with their troubled national past. This story is about a 20-something American woman, living in Manhattan, who becomes the ESL teacher for a rather disturbed recent Chinese (male) immigrant of about the same age. Both, it turns out, are mentally unstable, and the story recounts their troubled but intimate relationship and its repercussions over twenty or more years, both in the US and China. It's interesting, though not earth-shattering. It was my experience living in China and thinking about many of issues the book raised that made the story particularly interesting to me.

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### **M says**

I was really drawn into this story of a woman teaching ESL (post emotional breakdown) and her relationship with one of her students, a Chinese political dissident living in NY. Well written story about how people communicate, miscommunicate, hide, reveal, misunderstand, and understand in their relationships with themselves and others. In DeWoskin's novel, the human heart is fragile yet resilient.

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### **Rebecca says**

This book is very well written. However, I really didn't like most of the characters. I loved some of them, like Xiao Wang, but I didn't like Da Ge or Aysha. Obviously I finished the book, so I'll give it 2 stars, but I wouldn't read it again.

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### **Emily says**

Excellent storytelling. The format has chapters for each month of the year simultaneously in 1989 and 2001. I thought that this was very effective for telling two important storylines with the same characters. It is great to read about the everyday life of a tween's single mom while learning of the train wreck that she was before the daughter's birth. The love story and circumstances are not very realistic and I never really bought in to her deep love and devotion to Da Ge but I loved the Naomi and Xiao Wang support characters. It was also very interesting to have a first person account of a psychotic breakdown.

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### **Isaiah says**

I wanted to give this book five stars very badly, but I couldn't. The book had me hooked from the very first line and I was hooked until the very end. The story kept building, made me want to read faster and faster. After all of the building up it went no where. I was left at a high level of anticipation and longing, but the book abruptly ended. I have no suggestions on how to make the book end in a way that doesn't feel like a let down as the way the author presented time makes it difficult. Usually books with a great deal of time jumps

bore me, but every time jump drove me deeper into the plot, deeper into wanting to know everything. Overall the book was fantastic and I highly suggest it. My only issue is in the ending.

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### **Shoshana says**

This was recommended to me by someone I trust, and I see exactly why she recommended it, and maybe I just picked it up at the wrong time, but I didn't get through it before I had to return it to the library. I kept picking up other books instead, or writing song lyrics instead, or daydreaming instead. I don't know if the plot was too slow for me, or I didn't like the characters, or the prose just wasn't up my alley, or if the first person was getting to me (I have an automatic put-it-down reaction to first person, even though I've read a ton of great books in the first person), and I may try it again someday, but in the meantime, meh. I'd love to hear what other people think of it, though!

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### **Laura Lam says**

Background:

I devoured this book in one sitting when I was getting over an illness. It was the perfect book for it. Rachel DeWoskin moved to Beijing after studying at Columbia University and worked in PR before starring in a popular Chinese soap opera. Her years of experience in Chinese culture served her extremely well in this novel.

Synopsis:

Novel description from BookList: "Cultures don't so much collide as coalesce in DeWoskin's sparkling debut novel, which follows the relationship of two people with more in common than their backgrounds would suggest. Aysha Silvermintz is a marginally neurotic, sublimely needy young instructor of English to immigrants in Manhattan's Upper West Side. Her student Da Ge is an intriguingly taciturn, softly menacing Chinese national who came to the U.S. in the wake of the Tiananmen Square uprisings. What they lack in fluid communication skills they more than make up for in shared emotional fragility, born of family tragedies and personal failures. Aysha falls instantly and secretly in love with Da Ge, long before he bluntly asks her to marry him so he can become a U.S. citizen. Determined to understand what plagued this tortured, enigmatic man, Aysha moves to China, where she'll raise the daughter he never knew. Infusing her multicultural narrative with vibrant observations that glitter with laser-intense acuity, DeWoskin demonstrates a smart, sophisticated literary agility.

Musings:

I was writing a synopsis, but BookList did a wonderful job summing up the main points of the novel, though I deleted the sentence that gives away the heavily foreshadowed ending. Repeat After Me is nicely written and has beautiful, moving moments as well as adorably funny moments with the students fledgeling English. It shows the lives of immigrants in the late eighties of New York and the difficulties they face trying to be American. I learned a lot about the Chinese Cultural Revolution, which I was rather woefully ignorant of before. DeWoskin has wonderful descriptions of people and at the end of the novel, though it ends on a positive note, I sniffled. Characters are fairly complicated and I enjoyed the voice of Aysha and her story.

Recommendation:

This novel would appeal to people of a variety of age groups and anyone interested in different cultures and the struggles of immigration and being an expatriate. It's rare I have the attention span to read a book in one sitting these days, and so this is definitely recommended to someone who is ill and needs to escape for a few hours. I liked her writing style enough that I plan to pick up her memoir, *Foreign Babes in Beijing*.

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