

Martin County Library System Book Discussion Kit:

Lady Tan's Circle of Women by Lisa See

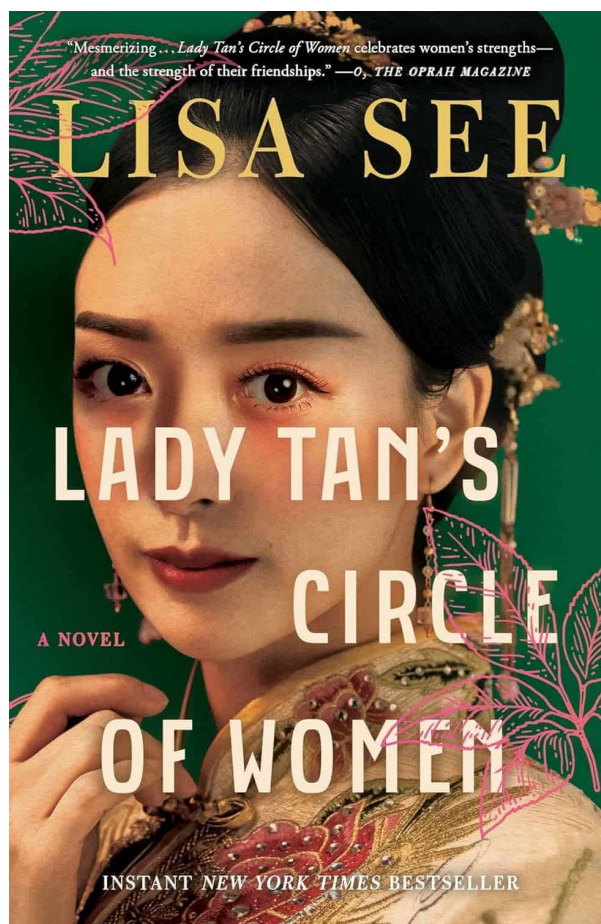
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Book summary

The latest historical novel from New York Times bestselling author Lisa See, inspired by the true story of a woman physician from 15th-century China—perfect for fans of See's classic *Snow Flower* and the *Secret Fan* and *The Island of Sea Women*.

According to Confucius, “an educated woman is a worthless woman,” but Tan Yunxian—born into an elite family, yet haunted by death, separations, and loneliness—is being raised by her grandparents to be of use. Her grandmother is one of only a handful of female doctors in China, and she teaches Yunxian the pillars of Chinese medicine, the Four



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Examinations—looking, listening, touching, and asking—something a man can never do with a female patient.

From a young age, Yunxian learns about women's illnesses, many of which relate to childbearing, alongside a young midwife-in-training, Meiling. The two girls find fast friendship and a mutual purpose—despite the prohibition that a doctor should never touch blood while a midwife comes in frequent contact with it—and they vow to be forever friends, sharing in each other's joys and struggles. No mud, no lotus, they tell themselves: from adversity beauty can bloom.

But when Yunxian is sent into an arranged marriage, her mother-in-law forbids her from seeing Meiling and from helping the women and girls in the household. Yunxian is to act like a proper wife—embroider bound-foot slippers, pluck instruments, recite poetry, give birth to sons, and stay forever within the walls of the family compound, the Garden of Fragrant Delights.

How might a woman like Yunxian break free of these traditions, go on to treat women and girls from every level of society, and lead a life of such importance that many of her remedies are still used five centuries later? How might the power of friendship support or complicate these efforts? *Lady Tan's Circle of Woman* is a captivating story of women helping other women. It is also a triumphant reimagining of the life of a woman who was remarkable in the Ming dynasty and would be considered remarkable today.

Source: <https://lisasee.com/books/lady-tans-circle-of-women/>



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Meet the Author

Lisa See is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Island of Sea Women*, *The Tea Girl of Hummingbird Lane*, *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, *Peony in Love*, *Shanghai Girls*, *China Dolls*, and *Dreams of Joy*, which debuted at #1. She is also the author of *On Gold Mountain*, which tells the story of her Chinese American family's settlement in Los Angeles. See was the recipient of the Golden Spike Award from the Chinese Historical Association of Southern California and the Historymaker's Award from the Chinese American Museum. She was also named National Woman of the Year by the Organization of Chinese American Women.

Source: <https://lisasee.com/about/>





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Discussion Questions

1. The opening of this novel begins with a preface which includes the line “My cousin has excelled at treating women because she has shared in the losses and joys of what it means to be a female on this earth.” How does this set up the novel and what is to come for Yunxian? After reading the novel, what does it mean to be a “female on this earth?”
2. How does the death of Respectful Lady shape Yunxian? What lessons from Respectful Lady does Yunxian carry with her? When Respectful Lady is near her end, she mutters: “To live is to suffer.” How is this a warning for Yunxian early in the novel?
3. Grandfather Tan and Grandmother Ru have very different ideas about childbirth. Who do you agree with, and why? Although 500 years have passed since the time the novel takes place, do you think these contradictory ideas still hold true today – not just for childbirth but for women’s medical care in general?
4. Lisa often writes about friendship: Snow Flower and Lily in *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, Youngsook and Mija in *The Island of Sea Women*, and now Yunxian and Meiling in *Lady Tan’s Circle of Women*. These two girls shouldn’t have contact with each other, let alone have a relationship formalized and sanctioned by Grandmother Ru and Midwife Shi. How do Yunxian and Meiling each benefit from the relationship? Are there downsides for each of them? Talk about what friendship means to you. And, since you’re all in a book club—typically a circle of women—share what it means to you.
5. Each character—and Yunxian’s relationship to that person—changes and evolves over time. How does Yunxian come to see and understand the characters of Miss Zhao, Miss Chen, Lady Kuo, Doctor Wong, and her husband and father?
6. The importance of having a son was critical in ancient China. It still is in many countries and cultures around the world. What are the main plotlines in the novel related to this issue? Consider the perspectives of Spinster Aunt, Miss Chen, Doctor Wong, Midwife Shi, Lady Kuo, and





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Meiling and Yunxian. Were these characters out for his or her own self-interest?

7. Lisa often uses aphorisms to help illuminate a character or a plot. One of the most significant in this novel is “No mud, no lotus”. Discuss how this aphorism is important to the story. On page 256, Miss Chen recites a series of aphorisms to Yunxian: “It takes a lifetime to make a friend, but you can lose one in an hour. Life without a friend is life without sun. Life without a friend is death”. What message is Miss Chen trying to convey to Yunxian? Lisa considers these aphorisms to be true across time and cultures. Do you agree? How have they played out in your life, if at all?
8. A case could be made that Yunxian was a modern woman. What are some of the ways she balances work and family? Do you see yourself in her?
9. The Dragon Boat Festival looms large in Yunxian’s imagination. What does it mean for her—and the other women who reside in the Garden of Fragrant Delights—to finally get to attend?
10. Lisa was inspired to write this novel during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, walking past her bookshelf to find a text she had but hadn’t read in the decade that she owned it. How does time and memory inspire us to examine neglected objects? Have you experienced newfound inspiration or ideas by the objects around your home?

Source: <https://lisasee.com/books/lady-tans-circle-of-women/#guide>

Book Club Extras

Lisa See is very supportive of book clubs. Visit her website (<https://lisasee.com/book-clubs/>) for more discussion guides, historical information, activities, and to post book club photos.

Recipes

Hot & Sour Soup

Ingredients

- 2 tomatoes (medium sized)
- 2 oz carrot
- 2 oz seafood mushroom
- 2 oz king oyster mushroom
- 3 pieces shiitake mushroom
- 1/4 oz dried wood ear mushroom
- 2 eggs
- 1 oz red bell pepper (half of a bell pepper, at the default serving size)
- 2 pieces green onion
- 2 pieces dried chili peppers (optional)
- 14 oz tofu (firm)
- 5 cup water (for soup base)
- 2 tbsp vinegar
- 1 tsp white pepper
- 1 tsp salt
- 1 tbsp sugar
- 2 tbsp light soy sauce
- 1/2 tbsp dark soy sauce (add more for a darker colored soup. Tamari works as a substitute)
- 3 tbsp cornstarch
- 2 tbsp water (for cornstarch slurry)
- sesame oil
- 1 tbsp corn oil





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Instructions

Step 1: Chop tofu, mushrooms, veggies. Wash all the vegetables, and then chop them:

- seafood mushrooms (2 oz): cut away the roots, and cut the stems in half;
- king oyster mushrooms (2 oz): cut in little strips
- shiitake mushrooms (3 piece): cut into thin slices (if you bought dried shiitake mushrooms, rehydrate them in warm water for 10 minutes)
- dried wood ear mushroom (0.25 oz): rehydrate in warm water for 10 minutes, then cut into thin slices
- tofu (14 oz): cut into thin strips
- carrots (2 oz): cut into thin strips
- red bell peppers (1 oz): cut into thin strips
- green onion (2 piece): mince
- tomato: dice into small cubes

Step 2: Prepare cornstarch slurry and eggs. In a bowl, mix together cornstarch (3 tbsp) and water (2 tbsp) with a spoon until it becomes an even slurry. In another bowl, crack eggs and mix well. For both of these, you'll need to mix them again later right before you pour them into the soup.

To save time for later, boil water (5 cup) in advance.

Step 3: Heat wok with oil, chili. Set the stove to its highest heat setting and start to heat up the wok. Add a little bit of corn oil (1 tbsp), as well as our dried chili peppers (2 piece). We'll heat and toss the chilies around the oil for about 1 minute as our wok heats up. The purpose is to add more of a spicy essence to the oil. Afterwards, we'll take the chilies out of the wok. We won't need them anymore.

Step 4: Add vegetables, flavors. Cook the diced tomatoes for 30-60 seconds, then add our boiling water (5 cup). Next, we'll add white pepper (1 tsp) and stir



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for 15-30 seconds. It's important to add the white pepper before we thicken it with cornstarch, since it's much easier to mix the white pepper evenly across the soup base. Then, we'll add salt (1 tsp), sugar (1 tbsp), light soy sauce (2 tbsp), and dark soy sauce (0.50 tbsp). If you prefer a darker look to your soup, you can add more dark soy sauce. Stir for 15-30 seconds. And finally, we'll add our tofu, mushrooms, and vegetables (with the exception of green onion). Stir gently for 5-10 seconds.

Step 5: Cover wok, bring to boil. Cover the wok with a lid. My dad opted for a smaller lid, which is supposed to help the wok come to a boil more quickly. Once it's boiling (in about 3-4 minutes), we'll add the rest of our flavors.

Step 6: Add cornstarch, egg, vinegar, sesame oil. Once the wok is boiling, we'll uncover the lid and add more character to our soup.

- Cornstarch slurry: Since the cornstarch has probably settled, mix it up again with a spoon, and slowly pour in the cornstarch over the course of 50-60 seconds. Stir constantly.
- Eggs: Beat the eggs again, and slowly pour in the eggs all around the wok, over the course of 20-30 seconds. Unlike Egg Flower Soup, we don't have to stir as we pour.
- Vinegar, Sesame Oil: Add vinegar (2 tbsp) to the wok, as well as sesame oil (to taste). In general, it's important to add the vinegar towards the end. In doing so, we aren't wasting its pungency by cooking and boiling it away.

Source: <https://www.madewithlau.com/recipes/hot-sour-soup>

Tea Eggs

Ingredients

- One dozen eggs (medium size is best)
- 2 tablespoons 'regular' soya sauce
- 2 tablespoons dark soya sauce (you can substitute regular soya sauce if you can't find dark)
- 2 teaspoons sugar
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 2 tablespoons (or bags) of black tea leaves (ideally a roasted/fermented Chinese tea, such as oolong)



Essential spices:

- 1 cinnamon stick
- 2 – 3 star anise pods (depending on size)

Optional spices:

(these are not essential but will greatly enhance the depth of flavor if you can include them. Alternatively, you could use half a teaspoon of Chinese five spice powder—easily found in most supermarkets—as a replacement, although fresh spices tend to be better)

- 2 bay leaves
- 4 whole cloves (not ground cloves)
- 1/2 teaspoon fennel seeds
- 1/2 teaspoon Sichuan peppercorns
- 2-4 black cardamom pods (not green)
- 1-2 pieces dried orange peel



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- Fresh ginger

Instructions

Hard boil eggs. Place the eggs in a pot with enough water to cover them completely and bring to the boil. Lower the heat to medium so that the water is not bubbling too vigorously (this prevents the egg whites becoming hard and rubbery). Traditionally, tea eggs are hard-boiled (10 mins) but if you prefer your eggs with softer/runnier yolks, you can boil them for a shorter period (eg. 7 mins for medium, 5min for soft-boiled eggs). Take the eggs out and let them cool (you can use an ice bath)

Pick up each egg and gently tap with the back of a spoon to crack the shell all over. Ideally, you want cracks evenly distributed over the surface. Don't worry if bits of shell come off, leaving small gaps, but be careful not to crack so hard as to remove large sections.

Put the cracked eggs in a small pot together with the tea leaves, soya sauce and spices. Add water until the eggs are completely covered.

Bring the mixture to a boil, then reduce the heat and simmer for about 20 mins.

Turn off the heat and leave the eggs soaking in the "tea broth" marinade for another couple of hours at least before eating. Ideally, they should be soaked overnight as the longer they have in the marinade, the more flavor is imparted to the eggs. You can transfer the eggs & marinade to the fridge after cooling and let them soak overnight, then heat them up again to a gentle boil before serving the next day.

Take the eggs out of the broth and peel to reveal the delicate, marble-like pattern on the surface. They can be served in a small bowl with a bit of the marinade, to further flavor the egg after peeling.



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Source: <https://www.hyhanna.com/tea-eggs-recipe/>

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