



What We Were Promised

Lucy Tan

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After years of chasing the American dream, the Zhen family has moved back to China. Settling into a luxurious serviced apartment in Shanghai, Wei, Lina, and their daughter, Karen, join an elite community of Chinese-born, Western-educated professionals who have returned to a radically transformed city.

One morning, in the eighth tower of Lanson Suites, Lina discovers that a childhood keepsake, an ivory bracelet, has gone missing. The incident contributes to a wave of unease that has begun to settle throughout the Zhen household. Wei, a marketing strategist, bows under the guilt of not having engaged in nobler work. Meanwhile, Lina, lonely in her new life of leisure, assumes the modern moniker taitai--a housewife who does no housework at all. She spends her days haunted by the circumstances surrounding her arranged marriage to Wei and her lingering feelings for his brother, Qiang. Lina and Wei take pains to hide their anxieties, but their housekeeper, Sunny, a hardworking girl with secrets of her own, bears witness to their struggles. When Qiang reappears in Shanghai after decades on the run with a local gang, the family must finally come to terms with the past.

From a silk-producing village in rural China, up the corporate ladder in suburban America, and back again to the post-Maoist nouveau riche of modern Shanghai, **WHAT WE WERE PROMISED** explores the question of what we owe to our country, our families, and ourselves.

What We Were Promised Details

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From Reader Review What We Were Promised for online ebook

Afoma Umesi says

Thanks to Little Brown for a free ARC of this book!

WHAT WE WERE PROMISED is the enthralling story of Chinese family forced, by the return of a prodigal son, to address familial issues and unfulfilled promises.

I was struck by the poignancy of her deceptively simple style, barely ten pages in! This book is full of astute observations about life, love, and the choices we make for the people we love. Combined with compelling characters, the mystery of Qiang's return and what it will mean for the Zhens, this book is hard to put down. Also, the shimmering backdrop of Shanghai — the food, the architecture, and yes, the smog, make Tan's novel feel like a complete visit to China.

This is sure to be on my list of favorite books from this year. I've already recommended it enough times to lose count. If you like books with simple language, insightful commentary about life and complex characters, read WHAT WE WERE PROMISED. A compelling, sensitive and thoughtful debut that is sure to move you, I highly recommend this novel!

Full review at [http://www.afomaumesi.com/2018/07/10/...](http://www.afomaumesi.com/2018/07/10/)

Meredith B. (readingwithmere) says

3.75 stars rounded up!

The Truth was more complicated than that. These objects of luxury they handled - how easy it was to fill them with meaning, to let them represent what you did or didn't have. How difficult, in fact, to know what you wanted in the first place.

This is the author's debut novel and it was beautifully written. This book dives into some deep rooted family issues that some cultures don't like to talk about.

As Children, Wei and Lina Zhen grew up in traditional Chinese-American homes. Their families were friends and when they were teenagers the families told them that one day, after college, that the two would marry. As custom goes, the two didn't interact very much up until that point. Instead Lina grew close to Wei's brother Qiang. They developed a very special bond which eventually turned into falling in love with each other. However, one day Qiang disappears, Wei gets an offer to go to America and due to the families agreements, Lina must go with him.

The Zhen's live in a luxury apartment complex in Shanghai. With this comes housekeeping as well as their ability to hire a nanny (ayi) to take care of their daughter and the family as a whole. One day, a bracelet was stolen from Lina and Sunny's friend Rose has been accused. There's a lot that comes from this bracelet being

stolen. It brings up marriage issues between Wei and Lina and the ultimate reason it's devastating is because the bracelet was given to Lina from Qiang, her true love. Qiang shows up one day and secrets start to be revealed. You'll have to read to find out what they are!

This book is by no means a fast paced novel, however, it does explore a lot of family issues in the Chinese culture. It brings up the questions of, is arranged marriage still OK? Is it OK to use your children to pay off debts? What if the person you are married to isn't the person that you have truly always loved? Does your family get to dictate that? Does being rich make you happy if you aren't with the person you fell in love with?

At times this book was slow for me which is why it took me so long to finish it. I would pick it up and read it a little bit at a time. I think I was maybe looking for there to be some sort of twist which at the end there is a little one. I would recommend going into this book knowing it's not going to be a super light read and it's going to make you think. I had to reread parts of the book at time to make sure I understood what was happening.

Overall I think this debut was pretty good. I am interested to see what Lucy tan has coming up next.

Thank you to Little Brown and Company for my Advanced Review copy of this book. All opinions are my own.

Sachi Argabright says

I absolutely LOVED this book! Definitely one of the best books I've read all year! The characters in this novel were so rich, and I grew to care about them deeply. While I could see Lina as an unlikeable character at times, I related to her early on in the story when she noted that being at ex-pat made her feel "in between." Being half Asian and half white, I also struggle with feeling like I'm not "fully" white or "fully" Asian. I also loved the secrets and hidden motivations that are unraveled throughout the book, especially towards the end! Tan's writing style is so unique and nuanced that I couldn't get enough! Would highly, highly recommend!!

Julie says

How love is seen differently as we age and when truths are revealed. Good debut novel.

Charlsa says

There has been so much hype about this up and coming author. I was disappointed. The story plodded along. None of the characters were particularly likeable. The author took too long to develop the characters but little time on telling the story and bringing it to a conclusion. Just when she finally started telling the story, the book ended. This didn't read like book one of a series, but if it turns out that is the case, I won't bother with book two.

Olga Fry says

I very much enjoyed Lucy Tan's debut fiction novel, "What We Were Promised." The book focuses on one family and two people floating in their orbit. The Zhen family is comprised of Lina, Wei, and their daughter Karen, none of whom are close to each other, much less have active conversations. While Qiang is Wei's brother, they haven't heard from him since their wedding day nearly 20 years ago. The second person in their orbit is Sunny. When first introduced in the novel, Sunny was the housekeeper assigned to their residence. A few chapters in, however, she and Rose (another maid assigned to the apartment), were accused of stealing. Instead of getting fired, Sunny is offered a position as an ayi (a nanny) to Karen. At the same time, Qiang calls Wei out of the blue to announce that he will be in town for a week to visit the Chinese Expo and will be staying with the family.

The novel featured a strong supporting cast, a fair amount of detail without being an information dump, and beautiful writing. Each word is deliberate, as is the sparseness in some scenes. It was fraught with tension but it didn't feel forced or overwhelming. I found it an emotional read about family expectations and the choices we make, as well as those made for us. The book also seamlessly moves between the characters and the class differences.

Growing up, Lina envisioned a different life for herself rather than the one carved out for her by her parents. She'd dreamed of pursuing her own career path, perhaps marrying a different man than the one she'd been betrothed to since birth. Even when the young couple moved to America, Lina kept a form of independence. It wasn't until after they moved back to China that she lost her sense of drive and settled into the housewife lifestyle. This change in personality doesn't go unnoticed by Wei, her husband. He doesn't do anything about it, however, preferring to throw himself into his work. His schedule doesn't lessen when Qiang arrives in town either. Qiang's arrival will force the characters to think about themselves in ways they've long been avoiding, which made for an excellent, compelling read.

Readingbringsjoy says

Thank you Littlebrown for the free review copy

What we were promised was a book that was on my radar because the description sounded exactly like my type of story. An interesting setting, a family recently coming into a lot of money, a long lost brother returning after years of being estranged, and lingering feelings left over after an arranged marriage. The lovely @annebogel helped put this book at the top of my list by adding it to her summer reading guide.

This book was such a fascinating look into the very wealthy upper-class families in Shanghai. I am talking wealthy with a capital "W." I love the contrasting storyline of the upscale Zhen family and their housekeeper Sunny who barely makes ends meet and lives in a group living situation. Sunny was a woman after my own heart. She watches others to find out their needs. Not every day needs you would think of, but rather the simple stuff you don't notice. For instance, if she saw a puddle of water near the tub she would place the towel closer to make it more efficient and comfortable for owners of the homes she cleaned. I love characters who appreciate the attention to detail like I do.

The story is slow and shifts from present-day Shanghai to a rural village in China. As the story was wrapping up I thought I knew exactly the direction it would take and was definitely shocked to find out how things were going to actually end. I stayed up way too late to finish the book because I needed to know how it would end. This story won't leave me. I keep coming back to it and thinking through what the ending meant and about how the characters handled different situations.

Lucy Tan's debut novel is written with similar immersive writing as Maggie O'Farrell and Fatima Farheen Mirza

Diana says

I liked this book more than I expected but not as much as I had hoped. It was the story of a couple different characters who live all merged in this one apartment in Shanghai. It's a different setting than most (any?) books I've read. It was a quicker read than I expected but maybe that contributed to not really gelling with any of the characters.

Maggie says

Tan's debut novel will definitely put her on the map for her beautiful storytelling and exquisite prose. She eloquently weaves together the characters' lives, flawlessly fusing the past and the present. Each page is filled with such rich detail that you feel as if you are living with the characters in their setting, that you know each of them intimately. At the end, you want the story to continue so you can continue living within their story and reality. Absolutely a must-read for 2018.

Elizabeth says

Well-written but entirely too slow-moving to hold my interest. Still bored after 100+ pages.

Lolly K Dandeneau says

via my blog: <https://bookstalkerblog.wordpress.com/>

'Fang Lijian's perspective on love was different from any she'd heard before. Lina's friends had watched too many American movies and to them, love was a classic car that would come roaring in from nowhere when the time was right, pick you up, and peel away. For all their warnings to her about relinquishing control marrying a man she didn't know, they seemed to crave the kind of love that made you lose control.'

The Zhen family returns to China after chasing the "American Dream", which didn't quite pan out the way they, and their elders, had expected. Wei didn't rocket to the success he and his father imagine, bringing greatness to his Chinese roots. His wife Lina isn't proud of her days spent as a taitai, a housewife who doesn't have anything to occupy herself with. When Lina's tanzanite bracelet from Africa (the only remaining keepsake of her early love) disappears, Lina isn't sure if the old maid stole it or not. Sunny is surprised when the Zhen family asks her to work for them as an ayi, to help with shopping, cooking and to

Lina's mind to have someone to distract their daughter when Wei's brother Qiang visits.

Lina feels a restlessness in her heart, a longing for a past that's long dead and the life she had imagined, that never breathed life. There was a time when she readied herself to be a dutiful daughter and wife, have many children and live with her in-laws in the village. All of that was obliterated with the reality of moving to America. Qiang and Lian had a moment, though he was the 'bad' son. Where Wei was a son to make any Chinese parent proud, Qiang was always in trouble, living in his honorable brother's shadow. Lina was groomed for marriage to Wei, who would surely make her life one of security, comfort. In her mind she would live out her life in the village, a dutiful wife and daughter-in-law, and never imagined she would one day be teaching Chinese to American children in the United States of America, only to return with nothing to do living in a tower. Why is she now, after so many years, mooning over the past knowing that her feelings for Qiang belong to a different time, a different Lina. Is it boredom, is it Qiang's plan to visit?

Wei isn't sure how to feel about seeing his brother again, who disappeared without a word, breaking their parents hearts. Shocked to learn that he is even still alive, and angered that he chose not to see their parents sets off a riot of conflicting emotions. It is with suspicion he opens his home to the bad seed. Surely, he must still be running around with criminals, gangsters? Just why does Qiang want to be a part of his family again? Where has he been all these years? Upon his arrival, Qiang seems filled with resentment towards his brother, and in Wei's mind, comes off as wanting to shame him for not reaching the greatness their father was adamant be his. Who knows better than Qiang what golden future was set for his brother Wei? Lina longs for her moment to find why he chose to abandon them all, especially her. Sunny is witness to everything that happens within' the Zhen household. She has gone from being 'under the suspicion of theft' to working as an ayi. She has her own story to tell, of her marriage and it's demise, of the money she earns with her hard work and sends home to her family. Sunny has her own family shaming to tolerate, as a daughter is meant to carry on the line, have children, not earn money like some man. Yet, it feels good to earn money, to sustain oneself without a husband to have dodged the life she knew in her bones wasn't meant for her.

This is a novel about cultural and family expectations, it is also how our lives take shape based on unexpected choices others make for us. It is finally getting the whole story, and feeling foolish for the time wasted wondering why. Too, it is about those who have everything, and those who work for them.

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Little, Brown and Company

Anne says

I've been fascinated with Chinese culture ever since I was in college and went on Semester at Sea my junior year. I love everything about it including the rich history and struggles so I was excited to read this novel. At first I had trouble getting into it though as there is so much backstory given to bring the reader up to speed with Lina and her family's present. But then as present and past are interwoven, it becomes clearer and more engaging as we have the Zhen family and Sunny as their housekeeper/nanny. We see the two different worlds of the affluent and the subservient, and later when her brother-in-law comes to visit we witness the buried secrets that have long plagued Lina as her worlds collide. Rich prose and nuanced language make this novel a very satisfying read that will resonate long after you have finished!

Thanks to NetGalley for this ARC!

Kate says

I'm so pleasantly surprised! More TK ?

Linda Hutchinson says

?????????? If you read my reviews, you know that I like to keep them succinct. This is the first book in a long time that is hard to describe in a limited number of words. A character drive novel set in modern day Shanghai revolves around four people, Wei (the wealthy father and family provider), Lina (married to Wei and unfulfilled), Qiang (Wei's bad boy brother), and Sunny (the maid turned nanny for the family). Post-revolutionary China is not the country that its revolutionary citizens expected. Socialism is a theory that never quite lives up to the country's promises. In the end, you still have distinct class of individuals who are very wealthy, middle class, and as always, the working class. Nowhere is this more evident than in the Zhen family which has a maid seeking a better life, a ne'er-do-well brother who let his first love marry his brother, a husband who succeeds at everything except satisfying his wife, and a wife who pines for a more fulfilling life. The author writes about Lina, "She was existing simultaneously in the imaginary past and in the actual present, an effort so all-consuming that every other action seemed a chore." I LOVED this book. It took me a while to read it because I had to savor every word and paragraph. Lucy Tan is a gifted writer with writing that requires close attention. Broken down, this novel is about love, family, duty, obligations, class, and a country trying to find its way in a new world order. Finely crafted and mesmerizing, I give it 5 stars even though I wish I could better describe the story. A top read for me this 2018. #love #family #life #newWorldOrder #expectations #book #boos #summerstooshort #familydynamics #mmdbookclub @annebogel #mmdsummerreadingguide2018 #whatWeWerePromised #LucyTan @lucyrtan @littlebrown

IG: @bookbimbo

Susanne Strong says

4.25 Stars* (rounded down)

Culture, Tradition and Family Ties. That is the story of "What We Were Promised."

The transition of moving from the United States to Shanghai is a difficult one for the Zhen family. Lina was a School Teacher and is now a "Tai Tai," a wealthy housewife, who need not work. Her husband Wei, is a successful Marketing Strategist. They live in Lanson Suites and have a Housekeeper and an AYI (a nanny/companion), named Sunny, - for their pre-teen daughter. Life is good. Then their quiet existence is disrupted when Wei's brother, Qiang, who no one has seen or heard from in over 20 years calls to say that he is planning to come visit. Both Lina and Wei have deep feelings about Qiang's visit, though neither have shared theirs with the other. Sunny, their AYI, however sees all.

Why is Qiang visiting after all of this time? How will it impact the Zhen's? Will it tear them apart or bring them closer together?

The ties that bind are oh so complicated, especially when different cultures and traditions are involved. Told in two different timelines with multiple narrators, “What We Were Promised” is a story about culture and circumstance and its impact on a family who shows their love for each other in different ways. Lucy Tan, expertly evokes the emotions of the characters and delves into the past of each individual quite well. When Lina, Qiang, Wei and Sunny ached, so did I.

“What We Were Promised” is a beautifully written novel which touched me in ways I can’t explain. Though I wished for a different ending, I was impressed with the way the author brought the storyline together.

Thank you to NetGalley, Little Brown and Company and Lucy Tan for a complimentary copy of this novel in exchange for an honest review.

Published on NetGalley, Goodreads, Amazon and Twitter on 7.23.18.

Susie says

As a second generation Asian-American, so much of this novel resonated with me. I've already read it cover-to-cover twice now, and will come back to it again when I'm in the mood for some seriously good writing and story, probably accompanied by a glass of wine and dark chocolate.

This book tells the story of a family—Lina, Wei, their adolescent daughter, Karen—moving back to Shanghai for Wei's marketing career after two decades of living in the U.S. One summer, Wei's brother comes to visit and Lina hires a housekeeper/babysitter named Sunny to free up her time to act as hostess. This premise sets up a book that's essentially character studies of people from different economic classes forced to live and interact within the confines of a single, well-staffed apartment building (Lanson Suites), all the while lying, hiding, evading, pining, and confronting one another with the deftness of any Edith Wharton character.

The three narrators—Lina, Wei, Sunny—represent the spectrum of complicated feeling I also have for modern day China and my place in it. There's the nostalgia for the homeland of my parents and grandparents (where I've also spent many summers and college vacations), the flattery of being considered “upper class” simply by having lived in the U.S., the disgust for the myriad of pretensions of the rich, and above all—the search for a life with meaning when you feel displaced by both home and culture.

My favorite character in the book was Lina; without giving away spoilers, I loved her flawed personality, her private reflections, even her outward chilliness towards her husband and so-called friends in her “breakfast club”. She's proud and guarded, a snob of the nouveau riche variety, but money isn't the thing she seeks—it's love, that elusive thing so hard to come by regardless of social class. So much of this novel explores what our cultural definition of love is (lust? trust? companionship?) through Lena's regrets for her past choices, but also, in a fascinating character arc, through the housekeeper, Sunny's, journey to decide if she wants to throw her lot in with a “good-enough” man, or try to make it on her own. It's seeing these characters evolve and change through their small, everyday decisions (that bear such lasting consequences!) that provides the greatest pleasures of this novel.

Tan's writing is so wonderfully understated and clean. There isn't a whiff of the pretensions found in other debut authors. She writes with absolute control and precision. If you pick out any one sentence from the

novel, it almost reads Heminway-esque in its plainness, and yet together, there's a such a beauty to its sparseness that I can only imagine the work that must of gone into achieving such restraint. It's the kind of book where I can flip to any page and immediately be absorbed within a matter of seconds. Do yourself a favor and spend a weekend with this, if only for the wonder of reading that incredible last sentence!

Jessica says

I can't tell whether I thought this was unremarkable and rather boring just because I've already read 16* books like it this year or if it really wouldn't stand out regardless. Normally I'd dismiss it as a so-so book: well-enough written and plotted to be worth reading if it sounds like your thing, definitely not a can't-miss. Anne Bogel put it on her minimalist summer reading guide, though! I'd love to know why. Our reading tastes aren't perfectly matched, so her favorite books won't necessarily be mine, but I was still really underwhelmed.

*made up number

Carol (Reading Ladies) says

2.5 stars. I'm underwhelmed. The first 90% of the story is build up and in the last 10% some important themes are introduced and the story ends. I thought what was brought up at the end was life changing, interesting, and important (avoiding spoilers here) and the story needed more time to explore the implications and how the disclosure will change their lives. As plot twists go, I thought it was fascinating and intriguing. The characters are not that likable but we do get a great look at Chinese home, family, and Shanghai culture. I enjoyed the themes of rich/poor, arranged marriage, the new rich, western/Chinese culture, family loyalty, the elite vs the help, traditional roles, etc. One small disappointment was with the Sunny/bracelet storyline resolution. Her choice at the end represented her resignation and a philosophy that is discouraging to me. I wanted more for her. In other circumstances I might have DNF'd this book, but I was committed to giving this Modern Mrs Darcey top pick a fair chance. Others have loved it....give it a try!

For more reviews visit my blog: readingladies.com

Jennifer ~ TarHeelReader says

4 stars to What We Were Promised! ?? ?? ?? ??

In *What We Were Promised*, the opening prologue includes the Zhen family leaving China to move to the United States. When life does not turn out the way they had expected financially, they return to Shanghai several years later.

Next, we meet Sunny, a housekeeper working in a lavish high rise apartment in Shanghai. Immediately apparent are the class differences as a result of her occupation, as well as her home background.

Years later, the Zhen family moves back to China, where their money goes further, and Lina, the wife, no longer has to work. They make their home in the fancy Lanson Suites in Shanghai where they hire a housekeeper and nanny companion for their teen daughter. The nanny they hire is Sunny.

Wei, the husband and father, begins to doubt his status as a marketing strategist and wishes he had chosen something more prestigious. At the same time, Lina is now lonely and bored without a job to keep her busy. Qiang, Wei's brother, mysteriously comes to visit, and there is an uncomfortable feeling both from Wei and Lina, with Sunny observing it all. Qiang has been on the lam for years and is associated with some dark activity, which forces Wei and Lina to confront the past, as much as they have tried to bury it. This is a novel of family and explores topics such as the appropriateness of arranged marriage, the necessity of love in marriage, and money and its role in happiness.

Overall, I found *What We Were Promised* to be a thought-provoking and beautifully written novel about cultural and familial expectations, and how those same expectations can unknowingly shape our lives. It is also a parable on those who have it all versus those who must work hard in order to have, and of course the lesson of just who is happier.

Thank you to Little, Brown and Company for the ARC. All opinions are my own.

My reviews can also be found on my blog: www.jennifertarheelreader.com

Lillian Li says

I loved Lucy Tan's *What We Were Promised*. A true talent, debut author Tan writes prose that is compelling, evocative, funny, and at the same time manages to cut straight to the core of things. Most impressive of all is the authority and care with which Tan builds her world of nouveau-riche Shanghai, not only situating the complex, cosmopolitan city in the equally complex history of China and the Cultural Revolution, but allowing this same history to shape and haunt her novel (as fully and inevitably as it does in reality). Don't even get me started on her characters. I cried just about anytime Zhen Hong came on the page. I loved Sunny, Rose, Karen, Little Cao, and my heart ached deeply for all the rest.
