



Happy Family

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When Hua Wu arrives in New York City, her life seems destined to resemble that of countless immigrants before her. She spends her hectic days in a restaurant in Chinatown, and her lonesome nights in a noisy, crowded tenement, yearning for those she left behind. But one day in a park in the West Village, Hua meets Jane Templeton and her daughter, Lily, a two-year-old adopted from China. Eager to expose Lily to the language and culture of her birth country, Jane hires Hua to be her nanny.

Hua soon finds herself in a world far removed from the cramped streets of Chinatown or her grandmother's home in Fuzhou, China. Jane, a museum curator of Asian art, and her husband, a theater critic, are cultured and successful. They pull Hua into their circle of family and friends until she is deeply attached to Lily and their way of life. But when cracks show in the family's perfect facade, what will Hua do to protect the little girl who reminds her so much of her own past? A beautiful and revelatory novel, *Happy Family* is the promising debut of a perceptive and graceful writer.

Happy Family Details

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From Reader Review Happy Family for online ebook

Daphnar says

Interesting short novel about a young Chinese woman and her relationship with an upper-middle class (upper class?) American family. Would have been 4 stars was it not for the unrealistic ending.

Martin Rowe says

Disclaimer: Wendy Lee works at my publishing company. I hadn't read her book before I hired her, and I wouldn't have hired her if the book stunk. Thankfully, *HAPPY FAMILY* is marvelously well-executed work of fiction. The story is a very quiet one until the last thirty pages where it explodes with a bang all the more forceful and shocking because of the understated and carefully observed narrative of the preceding two hundred pages. One of the distinctive pleasures of the book is how expertly Wendy has framed her sentences and how precisely she writes: no word is wasted and no character is not precisely delineated. The most courageous feature of the book is to pass all observations through a narrator who is not merely unreliable but almost entirely opaque to herself: her motivations and real affections are alien to her, and the reader is forced to supply them (frantically at the end) in order to make sense of a person whose recessiveness mirrors the invisibility she feels in the U.S. Wendy is currently working on a novel with a bigger canvas, which I feel will give her the opportunity to paint with more colors and thicker brushes. As it is, she has mastered the miniature.

TK says

Adoption is a beautiful and noble calling. Yet, it is imperfect, with biological parents, their extended families, and even whole nations left to mourn to loss of that child to some degree or another. At least, this is one of the points Wendy Lee elegantly and politely makes in *Happy Family*.

I truly enjoyed this novel. Lee's writing is gentle and fluid. The first-person narration -- Hua is a young woman recently-immigrated to New York City from a provincial town in China -- captures the point-of-view of someone torn between missing her family and wanting an exciting life in her new country. Hua keeps her secrets close, only letting details slip to us, and to others in the book, when she is ready to face them herself. This detachment is a convenient character trait, and allows Lee to successfully build her book; when combined with Hua's naivete, extreme events make sense to us.

Whether or not you are interested in foreign adoption as a theme, concept or choice, *Happy Family* has a lot to say about the nature of love, of parenthood, of the bonds between mother and child, and the costs of assimilation. Lee's metaphors are pleasing -- watching over a sick child, Hua finds herself "counting her each breath as though it were a valuable coin." Details about our American life that only a Chinese eye would notice are brought into sharp relief, with judgement but also with a curiosity that never alienates the reader.

Lee's book is a lovely reading experience, and I recommend it.

Sharon says

I hesitate to give 5 stars since I'm sure this isn't the best-book-ever classic, but what the heck, I liked it and thought it was well-written. I thought there were interesting structures and contrasts; the novel was like a puzzle that made me think about how all the ideas fit together. BTW, this book is also being discussed at: http://harlowmonkey.typepad.com/book_...

Although I think *Happy Family* was more about the characters (and in particular, the development of Hua, the main character) than about adoption per se, I do also think the author was commenting on international adoption (esp. with the kidnapping incident). While Jane clearly wanted a child, she also seemed to have a China fetish that Lily was helping to fulfill. The author writes on P. 56, "In some ways it was that simple: Lily needed parents and Jane and her husband needed a child. But foreigners were forever meddling in business that wasn't theirs, taking things that didn't belong to them."

This last statement, about foreigners taking things that didn't belong to them, is very interesting, in that Hua – a foreigner in the United States – takes small things belonging to Jane, and eventually takes her daughter, Lily. I thought it was a great irony that Jane adopted from China partially b/c she was afraid of a domestic birth parent coming back to steal the baby, yet her daughter is kidnapped anyway by someone who was close to having been a Chinese birth parent.

I felt Hua was an empathetic character. I felt anxious when she was poking around Jane's apartment (b/c I feared she might be caught at any moment) but I felt that her looking through Jane's things, and even trying on her clothes and makeup, made it a bit more believable that she might kidnap Lily.

Characters in the book compare whether remaining in China would have been worse than her situation in the United States, with the assumption that any life in China would be worse than the worst scenario in the United States. At Lily's birthday party, Jane, her husband, and Lily appear to be a "happy family", but "...that's the look of a couple before they split" says another mom. The other mom replies, "Well, if they do split up, I feel sorry for Lily." 'But think of what she was saved from. She would probably have died of some third-world disease of grown up with no education or been sold into sexual slavery if she stayed in that place.' (p. 169)" Both women laugh at the joke that this alternative might be better than all the therapy Lily will need. I don't believe that Hua takes Lily to save her from a broken family, though, since she herself is single. I thought it was more that she felt a connection with Lily, and Hua would lose that connection if she were no longer Lily's babysitter. . Hua believed she loved Lily, and maybe she did, but I think that was partly due to the fact that Lily was the same age Hua's own baby would have been.

One random thing... I didn't think it was realistic that Jane, as an adoptive parent, would refer to Lily's birth parents as her "real parents."

The novel also touched on white Americans' perceptions of Chinese people and culture. Jane hires Hua as a babysitter, but "Jane wanted me to be a role model for Lily, to teach her how to be Chinese. I didn't know if I could do it. (p. 97)" I think Hua feels this way partly because very few, if any, people probably fit the mold of a white American's fantasy of a Chinese person, but also because she had failed in her own life in China (by getting pregnant and flunking out of school). When Jane asks Hua what toys Chinese children play with, she can't think of any "acceptable" responses, so mentions kites – based on a picture she had seen in a book. At the same time Jane had a stereotype of Hua as a Chinese woman, she also somehow viewed Hua as being like herself when she was younger, in terms of her feelings and position in life. Neither of these images – despite seeming to be the ends of a spectrum – fit Hua. Surprisingly, however, Jane and Hua do seem to have

one very deep experience in common, although it is not developed in the book in Jane's character: Jane sees a therapist due to "losing a child, wanting a child, having a child..." (p. 163)" A main difference is that Hua does not have her own child (though perhaps the book is suggesting that, if international adoption is "foreigners taking things that don't belong to them," then Jane doesn't have her own child, either.

I was also interested (and disturbed) by the Evan character. He also somehow fits into what the author is saying about white Americans and their attitudes toward Chinese culture and people... Perhaps there was supposed to be a parallel between Evan using Hua to fulfill a China fetish and Jane using Lily in a somewhat similar selfish way. Both Jane and Evan used Hua because she was Chinese, but Jane did it in a way that was more up-front (admitting that one reason she wanted Hua as a nanny b/c she was Chinese) and compensating her financially. In contrast, I felt Evan was not up-front about his motives... but, on second thought, maybe he actually was. After all, he was clear about his personal interest in China, and the (creepy) venue of their first date must have made his intentions clear! And, on thinking about Evan further, I'd say he is key in Hua's character development, too. She was snookered by men twice. I guess he had me snookered too, b/c I initially thought he might be the way up for Hua.

Ivy says

I bought this book on a whim when the Borders in my area was closing and everything was on clearance. It was okay, but overall I found Hua's character difficult to believe.

Mary says

Not what I expected in that the story didn't expound on the lead character coming from China and living in NYC. It was more a story of a brief time in her life following her arrival. Very well written and an easy, quick read. Entertaining, but not as emotionally fulfilling as reviews led me to believe.

Bethany says

Good premise but then went nowhere.

Parag says

I usually don't write long reviews, but this book inspired me to be full of myself.

I opened the book, and got through the first section in a casual sitting. It wasn't immediately compelling: the writing didn't do much for me, the characters weren't believable, and the dialogue didn't pop. By the time I got to the end of this thing, I realize that it was little more than a story idea that the author didn't have the tools or chops to develop very well at best, and an awful fetishization and objectification of a number of things (cross-cultural adoption, immigrant lives that the author seems not to understand at all, etc). From the perspective of accuracy and authenticity, the novel is highly problematic. But even as a work of literature, it fails miserably.

I read through the rest of the novel in a late night reading binge which was less wholesome for my physical/mental health than eating a whole bag of Flaming Hot Cheetos and washing it down with a two-liter of Dr. Pepper. There are so many reasons, but I'll just give an example: Act III or Act IV of the novel (too annoyed to count) leads us down a completely different path than where the novel was going, with everything unraveling faster than I could keep track, leaving me empty, really. I didn't care about the characters, when I had actually wanted to. Throughout, I didn't believe the protagonist: writing from the point of view of someone so different from yourself is always a risk, but here, it felt like an unforgivable conceit of the author that she could give voice to a recent immigrant woman first working in a restaurant and then as a caregiver to an adopted Chinese child.

Then the book was over.

I really try to support Asian American writers, but this review, for all its imperfections, is probably more bearable than this book. If it came out 10 years ago, I could understand the publisher trying to capitalize (still on the late side) on the Amy Tan effect. No idea how this got published. Read Fae Myenne Ng or a dozen other writers who have serious skills, and even as they give us complicated characters, understand that there are people writing who will think that this kind of story is actually representative of real people, rather than a lazy imagination and what seems like little research on the lives she is trying to present.

Skip this book.

Barbara says

While I enjoyed the characters in this book, and the insight into immigration from China, as well as the life of a young girl in China, the story, ultimately, was depressing.

Regan says

Kind of a dumb story. It didn't really go anywhere.

Becka says

A quick but absorbing read, *Happy Family* is about a young woman who is a recent immigrant to New York City from China. First a waitress at Chinatown restaurant, Hua Wu becomes the au pair to Lily, a Chinese-born child adopted by a well-off American couple, Jane and Richard Templeton. Hua becomes attached to Lily and ultimately makes an irrational decision when she finds out that the Templetons are splitting. While I enjoyed reading *Happy Family*, I could not sympathize with the main character and her actions. I felt sorry for her hardships -- her loneliness, her lack of free time for leisure, and her separation from her own family -- but certain small but significant actions made me uncomfortable. For example, while Hua watched Lily in the Templetons' brownstone, she would try on Jane's clothes, use her perfume, and consider stealing little trinkets. In general, she was obsessed with Jane Templeton and Jane's life right from the beginning, when she met them at a park. And I thought that her rash, and criminal, decision to in effect kidnap Lily at the end was utterly crazy. The prose and plot flowed well, but the protagonist did not have many if any redeeming qualities.

sarah says

What a disappointment. The characters weren't very deep and neither was the plot. Like the main character, I am an immigrant to the U.S., however, I did not find Hua, the main character, relatable or believable at all. The only reason why I finished it was because I was stuck on a plane with nothing else to read.

Evander Lomke says

A truth (which should be universally acknowledged) is that there is a cluster of elements binding all young people arriving in the U.S.: apprehension, anticipation, the allure of material and political freedom. There are often considerable barriers of language to be overcome; personal boundaries of adaptation and assimilation; cultural lines that are to be crossed and those to remain un-crossed. If a new persona is assumed, what might the peer group say? Often-unspoken forms of banishment and isolation follow: he or she simultaneously juggles identities and manners, ever and never at home within any setting. In *Happy Family*, novelist Wendy Lee artfully, surgically, and, without judgment, examines all these elements among a handful of well-drawn Chinese-Americans confronting Western society. When a smart immigrant, hired as a nanny, bonds with a Chinese tot, likewise orphaned and adopted by a well-meaning upper-middle-class (white) couple in an uncertain relationship, fundamental ties of nationality and family are tested. We are who we are. This truth unfolds thro the refreshing sensibility of a new yet already accomplished author.

Laura K says

I wanted to like and sympathize with Hua, I really did. But her stealing, lying and stalking got in the way from the beginning. Its weird how, when choosing a rating for a book, intense dislike for one of the characters can almost interfere with rating whether the book itself is good. But I won't let that happen here.

It took two tries for me to get through this book. The beginning was slow, but once things got going, I was interested and couldn't put it down. If I had to rate the book on how I liked the main character, I'd have given it one star. Sure, she had been through a lot, but the fact that she felt absolutely no remorse or even momentary pause for any of her intrusive actions led me to think that her behavior was caused more by lack of feeling than traumatization. She didn't even seem to love Lily, she just seemed to see her as an object.

Other reviews have mentioned the "surprise ending", but to me, it wasn't really a surprise. And, to answer the last question in the readers guide, "No, I don't think Hua will be successful in her new life because she has no remorse for her bad choices. In the final act of grand self-delusion she even wonders if she should be 'thanked'."

Leya says

...i dont have any words. I honestly dont know what to think of this book. I mean i had sad emotions mostly through out the end. And it was a casual read so i didnt really dislike the book as i was reading. But i mean i

don't think this reflects what newly immigrants go through like it says on the back. And hua literally kidnaps the child!! That reaaallyyy threw me off. She never harmed the child. Never intended to but still. I didn't know if i was supposed to like or dislike hua. Am i supposed to sympathize with her? Hua is lonely and ya she loves the child but you don't kidnap her! Ya i honestly don't know. The ending just reaaalllyyyyy threw me off. And also she seemed a little too creepy and weird. You know, getting into their business, stealing their things-harmless things but still stealing- stalking them etc. Yaa... i actually enjoyed the book but the ending made me rethink and then i noticed the small things she did that made her seem a little...off. i still think she's harmless even after all that. She did return the child to her parents.
