



Twenty Fragments of a Ravenous Youth

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The latest novel from Orange Prize finalist Xiaolu Guo is the enchantingly comic story of a young Chinese woman's life as a film extra in hyper-modern, tumultuous Beijing.

Though twenty-one-year-old Fenfang Wang has traveled 1,800 miles to seek her fortune in urban Beijing, she is ill-prepared for what greets her: a Communist regime that has outworn its welcome, a city in slap-dash development, and a sexist attitude more in keeping with her peasant upbringing than the country's progressive capital. But after mastering the fever and tumult of the city, Fenfang ultimately finds her true independence in the one place she never expected.

Twenty Fragments of a Ravenous Youth Details

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From Reader Review Twenty Fragments of a Ravenous Youth for online ebook

Dana Al-Basha ???? ?????? says

The reason I bought this book is for the cover and because it was so short as well, I wanted to read something a bit different than what I usually go for, and reading this book was very interesting; while I was reading I was so shocked by a lot of things in the book like the traditions in the far east, the Chinese way of thinking, the poor circumstances of some people like the starving actress in this book. But there is one thing I didn't like at all, how she "the writer" wrote about God, with no respect whatsoever, it was very bad indeed, she kept calling him : "Heavenly Bastard in the sky"! I really hated that so much! Come on! Talk about anyone but not God! I'm not even Christian!

It always seems to me like the far east of Asia live in a different universe with different rules than the rest of the world, their culture bewilders me (and fascinates me)!

Sonia Almeida Dias says

Loved this book. Smart, well written, comes to show what we all know already, we are all so different but we are all the same. I like reading books from cultures so different than mine, and this was an interesting portrait about coming of age on collective China, and trying to be an individual on a society where that is not allowed. Growing up in a time and in a place where everything is changing fast, and where you cannot keep up with the pace of the world around you, can be difficult and interesting at the same time.

Recommended to all those who like Asian literature, and learning new ways.

Hesper says

Slim and deceptively spare, impressionistic in approach. Had this been written by a white dude it would immediately get labels like "incisive," "bleak," and "bildungsroman," most likely combined into one obnoxious blurb written by, very probably, another white dude. As it is, it gets a pretty but not particularly relevant cover, and undeserved obscurity.

It's the story of Fenfang, a village girl trying to make it as an artist in Beijing, and Xiaolu Guo is an excellent writer. Her language is direct, unadorned, making for a seamless blend of social critique and pure narrative. Guo doesn't pull punches; she's simultaneously invested and clinical, a trait that echoes in Fenfang's raw yet detached voice.

As a sidenote, this book felt hugely autobiographical. Maybe I read that somewhere, and forgot I did? It's not

a bad thing; if anything, it strengthens the impression that this is a work of particular relevance to its author.

Cheri says

It was fascinating to experience Beijing from the point of view of a young peasant who runs away to the city to make her own way. The obstacles are many, especially for a woman, but not so different from what anyone anywhere might experience when trying to make it completely on her own. The book keeps its promise to give us only fragments, and I enjoyed the jumping around in time, but there was a little too much disconnect with Fenfang herself. I didn't quite understand her motivation (or ability) to write, how she ended up with primarily foreign friends, or why she spent three years with Xiaolin. I often couldn't tell whether she had gumption or was just out of options. Still, I was drawn into her story and enjoyed the author's wry humor.

MJ Nicholls says

A simple, lyrical, disheartening coming-of-age story from an eminent Chinese polymath. The tone is largely bleak and hopeless, and captures the feeling young artists have of being stuck at the bottom looking at the top: nothing but a pocketful of dreams against a world of indifference. It certainly struck a chord.

Samadrita says

Sometimes I get this nagging suspicion that there's a greater conspiracy at work to make women writers all over the world feel unloved and unappreciated.

cough V.S. Naipaul *cough*

There's a deliberateness in the way most fiction authored by women is either labelled 'chick lit' and dismissed right away without a second thought or made light of under various other excuses.

Why else would this book have an average rating below 3.5?

Let me offer you a word of advice. Don't go by the beautiful cover, it is highly misleading.

Neither is Xiaolu Guo's protagonist (a thinly veiled version of herself) half as slender or as pretty as the girl on it nor is this book about a girl navigating her way through the complicated labyrinth of dating and singles and finding her 'one true love' who sees her 'inner beauty'.

Twenty Fragments of a Ravenous Youth brings into focus the position of women in a country rapidly elevating itself to a position of profound importance in the global arena but curiously enough, lacking conspicuously in the human rights department.

It explores themes of isolation, urban boredom, the sheer tragedy of everyday life, personal freedom and the deep disconnect between an increasingly authoritative Communist regime and disillusioned citizens, in a quintessentially nonchalant manner.

Xiaolu Guo's heroine Fenfang speaks in a slangy Chinese, swears often and has extremely messy living habits. She is strangely apathetic to the happenings in her own life and has the rare ability of analyzing most aspects of it with a casualness that is as scary as it is unique.

After having quit the disturbingly monotonous life in the countryside where her parents are but humble farmers with little variety in their daily routines, a starry-eyed Fenfang comes to Beijing with dreams of becoming a film actress or a script-writer. But quickly she discovers, the city is not all that it is hyped up to be. Directors aren't interested in casting her as the lead and producers won't even read stories 'written by a woman' let alone accepting them as scripts for tv shows. And the old-fashioned folks of her neighborhood who take pride in sporting red Communist armbands to boot, are disapproving of the smartly dressed, independent, young female who has the audacity to bring a man home at night.

Refusing to lose heart, Fenfang starts working as extras on film and tv drama sets and slowly but surely begins carving out a niche for herself. She makes peace with stalkers, violent, physically absent, insensitive boyfriends, the cockroaches in her apartment and even the police who arrest her just to deliver a lecture on ideal behavior expected of an 'unmarried woman' and the unreasonableness of a woman being too 'individualistic'.

But even in the midst of these bleakest of surroundings, she finds an answer to the eternally baffling question of what true freedom really means.

This book has tried to lay Beijing bare - reveal the ugly facet of a city which still insists on practising blatant sexism and vigilantly guarding obsolete ideals in the 21st century, while maintaining the facade of rapid infrastructural development.

And it has helped me come to the realization that it is indeed possible to merge relevant sociopolitical issues seamlessly with an otherwise ordinary narrative of an ordinary girl.

Neither has Xiaolu Guo tried to present this book as highbrow literature nor has she made the effort to write long, verbose sentences replete with symbolism or imagery. Instead she has directed her energies at highlighting the predicament of the young, modern woman all over the world and especially in a country like China, where the so-called 'weaker sex' is still not in the driver's seat. And for me, this is an achievement she deserves praise for.

A 3.5 stars rounded off to a willing, impressed 4 stars.

I'll definitely read her other works.

Margritte says

"My youth began when I was twenty-one. At least, that's when I decided it began. That was when I started to think that all those shiny things in life - some of them might possibly be for me.

If you think twenty one sounds a bit late for youth to start, just think about the average Chinese peasant, who leaps straight from childhood to middle age with nothing in between. If I was going to miss out on anything, it was middle age. Be young or die. That was my plan."

Seventeen-year old Fenfang Wang decides to leave her village where nobody talks and where life begins and ends like the sweet potatoes underground. If the man coughs twice today and spit once, he will do it again the next day and the next day and the next day. She wants to experience the booming city of Beijing, escape the peasant monotony of poverty and manual labor with no intellectual development ever happening. She travels 1 800 miles to accomplish this dream where she soon finds different jobs, ending up working in the film industry as an extra, lives in different places and eventually learns that loneliness becomes a destination

in a cruel world out there when a young girl wishes to be independent and not be dominated by a boyfriend and his family.

It is a coming of age novella of a young Chinese girl who experience the first harshness of the adult world she does not really understand yet, but is determined to get to know. She becomes part of a fast changing China where Comrades still sleep on their jobs they're getting paid for, and still rampantly spy on neighbors, family and friends, while the private sector is rapidly changing China into a boom fest. Even Ginger Hill village, her home turf becomes The Ginger Hill Township with new developments changing the rural landscape forever in her absence.

My comments: It is certainly not the best Chinese author I have read so far, but still a delightful read. The innocence in her observations are interesting and appreciated. Nothing escapes her and her mind is driving her emotions and fears like the crazy taxi driver who rushes her through dark city streets for late night meetings with obnoxious movie moguls. The cities never sleep.

She is ambitious, intelligent, smart. Beijing, a dynamic city, is introduced to the reader where Communism is present, but not the overwhelming focus. The energy of the different cities she lives in becomes part of the reader's heartbeat - the noise, the pollution, the smells, the food, the people, the seasons, everything. Nothing is really heart-stoppingly exciting though and I was confused with the time lapse between some of the fragments. However, it is an eye-catching coming-of-age novella.

I just wonder how she got into contact with her English editors and translators. It is not a story. The title says it all. The fragments of her life, almost written in a diary style, follow each other chronologically and bind the experience together. It ends almost on a cliffhanger and had me confused. But it is still an eye-opening read. I enjoyed it.

It was more than that to me. Thanks to Sue, it was a very special treat indeed!

Jill says

In 2017, China became home to the most billionaires in the world, minting on average two new members to the billionaire club every week. 17 years earlier, at the dawn of the new millennium, the number of Chinese billionaires hovered the single digits. Therefore *Twenty Fragments of a Ravenous Youth*, set in Beijing around the year 2000, functions as a dual bildungsroman: the coming-of-age of a girl living in a country that is coming of age too.

Fenfang leaves a village that grows sweet potatoes for a city that sprouts movie stars. Author Xiaolu Guo paints a vivid memento of a Beijing where entire neighborhoods are emptied of inhabitants overnight and occupied by towering cranes and blocks of scaffolding the next morning. Fenfang learns a hard truth in the endless flux: just because things are changing all around her doesn't mean that she will be changed too.

The novel is Chinese literature for Westerners, offering a peephole into a strange country at an even stranger moment in world history. Guo wields metaphors with expertise to build fantastic character portraits: Fenfang, upon leaving her tiny village, avows to "never again live like a sweet potato under the dark soil." She constructs the novel in vignettes, the twenty "fragments" of the title, but it remains a cohesive whole. Of particular interest to me was Guo's exploration of how to come of age as a woman without a man as a catalyst. Due to the difficulty of doing so, Fenfang oscillates between confidence—

My youth began when I was twenty-one. At least, that's when I decided it began. That was when I started to think that all those shiny things in life—some of them might possibly be for me.

—and doubt—

I had this great urge to cry, but I didn't want to cry alone. For a really good cry, I needed a man's shoulder.

By the end of the twenty fragments, Fenfang's youth is definitively ended. China, too, has entered a new age. But in Guo's careful hands, the ending is not only abrupt and melancholy but also a hopeful start.

Sookie says

The protagonist Fenfang arrives at Beijing in hopes of becoming a movie star just when Beijing itself is stepping into world arena, expanding its role in modernization. China grows in the same rapid fashion as Fenfang lives moves; displaying a modicum of modernization while parts of the city (and country) remains intact. Fenfang points out her ravenous nature which is pretty much a representation of rural China in itself. She is a refreshing protagonist who looks at numbers with hope where there is none, gets through her life when people around her frowns at her choices and shapes up to be the person she thinks is the best.

This is my third book by Guo and like the previous two, this one too has a young woman at its center, alienation from family and home, quips about Chinese-English dictionary, Hollywood reference, Chinese authoritative regime, absence of the word "romance" in Chinese, to name a few. The recurring themes make the context familiar and easy to get lost in the life Guo creates for her protagonist. Written mainly from Fenfang point of view, Guo gives glimpses of life in late 90s China when modernization jarred the traditional values so much so that a police officer casually remarks "...she had it coming. What did you expect from an independent girl?" [not verbatim]. Guo doesn't linger on these observations. Fenfang understands and as does the reader.

There is quietness in this book, like you are peeking into the life of a person who is working as an extra in a popular drama. There isn't ground breaking drama, there aren't heartbreaks that go on for days. There is peaceful acceptance of decisions and moving on to the next thing.

And that's exactly what she does.

AC says

A lovely book - I thoroughly enjoyed reading it -- including the acknowledgments.

Basically... how does a peasant girl from rural China become a modernist ... in 20 snapshots...

...and in the blink of an eye.

Nesa Sivagnanam says

This is a first book I'm reading by this writer and I must say that I liked it very much. I read it through in one sitting and the way the story is written pretty much demands that.

Fenfang is and has travelled one thousand eight hundred miles to seek her fortune in Beijing. In the city she tries the persona of a movie extra. She's tired of making tin cans, cleaning rooms and tidying movie theaters for a living. She's hungry for love, to appease the loneliness in her stomach that even her favorite instant noodles can't fill. She's torn between an abusive relationship whose love she understands and the attentions of an American she yearns to comprehend.

Raised to keep her emotions in check, Fenfang's feelings are so submerged, it takes close attention to learn her secrets. But Fenfang is generous with her descriptions and observations of life in modern China and the challenges of one young woman among the millions juggling new and old, east and west.

"Everything around me was changing so fast — my apartment block, the local shops, the alleys, the roads, the subway lines. Beijing was moving forwards like an express train, but my life was going nowhere. Okay, so I was getting lots of work, but it was all the same. Woman Waiting on the Platform, Lady in Waiting, Bored Waitress. I was only in my twenties, but I felt seventy. I had to do something, ask my brain to start working, so I could match this fast-moving city."

After many attempts, Fenfang finds her escape from anonymity, just as China transitions into a starring role on the world stage.

Brian says

Tomorrow, when more clear of head and calmer of excitements I shall attempt some thoughts worthy of this book. Wow.

Thank you Samadrita for your inspiring review and recommendation of this book.

Nafiza says

Twenty Fragments of a Ravenous Youth offers a glimpse into the life of a 20-something Chinese woman trying to survive in the city of Beijing. This is a rather bare statement and does not do justice to what the book truly contains. It's a peek into the psyche of someone who is just like you and me except she exists in a city, in a country that is alien to what people in North America are used. Fenfang's voice is wry and cynical and her signature phrase (also incidentally the one that attracted me to the novel initially):

Great Heavenly Bastard in the Sky

is very revealing of her irreverent attitude towards life and the living of it. You always feel a bit removed

from Fenfang. The book is told almost entirely in narration and contains very little dialogue and most of it is introverted thoughts and observations. Not something that would normally be interesting but somehow, maybe because it's pithy and so very involved, I had no trouble empathizing and feeling for Fenfang. I really loved the ending not because it tied up everything so perfectly but because it ended on this irrepressible note of possibility.

This book is a study in contradictions. There is a lot of cynicism in it but it is hope that buoys it and makes it a success. It paints a very convincing picture of a girl trying to survive the life given to her. To not just be a passive passenger in this journey but, excuse my advent into cliches, to make something of herself. I think you will enjoy Xiaolu Guo's interpretation of youth and the hunger that accompanies it.

Sue says

This is a contemporary novel that begins at the turn of the new millennium as Fenfang (who may be the author's alter ego of sorts) decides she can no longer tolerate the quiet, the boredom, the fields, even her parents and has to leave the countryside for Beijing and her dreams of becoming a scriptwriter or actress. Along with her we see the reality of Beijing under Communism, the crowds, the dirt, the pollution, the poverty, and the very limited expectations for all women.

She tries different strategies and repeatedly loses. She has an American boyfriend and a Chinese boyfriend stalker. She is reported to the police for her improper ways and is lectured as to the correct ways for a young woman to live. None of these things seem to have a lasting impact. Her emotions are curious; at times she is full of sorrow, at times she is amazingly passive---perhaps beaten down by the world around her. Happiness is rare.

Xiaolu Guo allows Fenfang to provide a verbal picture of Beijing near the end of the book.

"This was Beijing. A city that never showed its gentle side. You'd die if you didn't fight with it, and there was no end to the fight. Beijing was a city for Sisyphus ---you could push and push and push, but ultimately that stone was bound to roll back on you." (p 157)

Not a welcoming place to a person of any age, much less a young person with dreams.

Rating 3.5*

Recommended for it's view of a different China, a modern state we don't always see. Also a young person's view as Fenfang was only 17 as the stories begin.

Laetitia says

Why isn't this novel more popular? Because it is Chinese? That cannot be why, can it?

Also, why does it only have a GoodReads rating of 3.4? It should be more than that because this is one of the best coming-of-age novels I have read in a while.

China intrigues me and sadly I don't know that much about it so I decided to read more Chinese literature. Reading Xiaolu Guo's *Twenty Fragments of a Ravenous Youth* was a great experience.

It is about a young Chinese woman called Fenfang, who decides to leave her life as a peasant behind and start a new life in Beijing. Fenfang is ambitious and hard-working, she wants to become an actress and begins her career as an extra. She soon realises that life in Beijing can be cruel and ruthless, especially as a woman. Communism, surveillance, poverty and sexism are part of her daily life.

She is taken to the police station because she's not behaving like a young, unmarried woman is supposed to behave. Moreover, she faces sexism in her workplace as the men in the film industry keep objectifying her and often measure her merit based on her looks and not her hard work.

Great novel, I would read it again.

Hadrian says

Twenty Fragments of a Ravenous Youth (or "The 37.2 degrees of Fen Fang" in Chinese) is the story of a young woman who moves from a potato farming village to Beijing. She has dreams of artistic success, but is stuck in the mire of nameless minor roles. She writes, and stands firm against the oppressive bulk of the city.

Fenfang is a realistic and convincing character. She is not overstylized or ideal, but has a sardonic and detached voice. She appears cynical, almost used to the lack of food or cockroaches in the bad apartments, but she is still resilient as she matures.

One of the benefits of a Chinese author rewriting their own story in English is that they avoid these long patronizing explanations of their own culture and treating it as the exotic. Erguotou and longevity noodles are taken without a long stupid paragraph of their significance. The city itself is different, but that is from their own perspective, of how much the city and country have changed in the past decades. This is the reason behind the stacks of pirated DVDs, or the bizarre language courses. This is life in the city of Beijing. This is how it is done.

Karen says

This short novel tells the tale of Fenfang, a young Chinese woman who leaves her peasant village for Beijing in the hopes of changing her life. In Beijing she becomes an actress, scoring such enviable roles as *Woman Walking Over Bridge* or *Woman Pouring Tea*, all non-speaking, background parts. No matter how she tries to become a major player--both in film and in her own life--greatness seems to evade Fenfang. Barely scraping by, Fengang is ravenous for this meaningful life she so longs for but cannot find or, in some ways, even properly identify.

The narrator mentions Marguerite Duras, one of my favorite authors, and the style of the book is reminiscent in some ways of Duras's style. This book is both humorous and very sad. I loved Fenfang's constant

reference to "Heavenly Bastard in the Sky" and think it is a phrase I will soon be using in my own daily speech. I'm not sure I can adequately describe why I liked this so much, but it had an effect on me, and I keep thinking about it. It also taught me more than I previously knew (which was really nothing) about what it might be like to live in a Communist country.

Jesse says

What at first seems a bit like hollow shards of reflection gain resonance as the pieces fall into place and some semblance of the self begin to be formed. Each chapter--or fragment--conveyed in shimmery, deceptively simple prose, serves as a brief reflection of what initially seems to be a trivial situation or occurrence, only revealing its emotional weight later. It's as if the traces and residue of the "off moments" are the things that give shape to life itself, bringing to mind Joyce Carol Oates's musing "how quietly, how placidly, how invisibly the truly significant events of our lives take place...". A bit slight but rather beautiful.

"People always say it is harder to heal a wounded heart than a wounded body. Bullshit. It's exactly the opposite--a wounded body takes much longer to heal. A wounded heart is nothing but ashes of memories. But the body is everything. The body is blood and veins and cells and nerves. A wounded body is when, after leaving a man you've lived with for three years, you curl up on your side of the bed as if there's still somebody beside you. That is a wounded body: a body that feels connected to someone who is no longer there."

Aubrey says

4.5/5

Sadness was better than emptiness.

I used to follow a polling blog up until the point that the hideous disconnect between it and my reality made its reoccurring engagement with "Millennials" impossible to deal with. Why don't Millennials move as much as their predecessors? Why do so many Millennials fail to move out? Why is the life expectancy of Millennials breaking the "progress" of increasing? Why; why; why? *Money*, you shitsucking numbfucks, along with the aside of ever increasing fascism now that the National Endowment for the Arts is facing extinction. If you've never starved to death in your apartment due to a spike in your permanent despair over your life and its lack of steady-job-at-21-marriage-at-23-house-at-25 choices, congrats. If you have and still persist in believing that this book is indeed, as the GR description says, 'comic', you've ripped out your heart to appease another's head.

Only foreigners know about China's history, I thought.

The great thing about the concepts of bildungsroman and künstlerroman is that anything goes. So you're in China instead of Europe/Neo-Euro, a rural traveler instead of a fortune squanderer, a woman instead of a man, Asian instead of white. What follows will not be to the expectation of anyone who's been guaranteed any portion of the US dream of 'normalcy' and all the dreams of exotification of lust that are consequent. Instead, you get the said lust control instead of the lust, the pursued instead of the pursuer, the dead body in the ditch rather than the character development that is birthed from it, the written instead of the writer. Spoilers would be telling how exactly this is all bleakly and tortuously subverted and bullheaded through, so I

won't. I also won't say that my eyes didn't glaze over at certain points when the references were unfamiliar and the Duras-philism was a bit much, but who's to say that wasn't satire of the Genuine Passion Schtick corporations cultivate to hook in hundreds of talented yet underpaid underdogs? With prose that's deadpan to the point of provoking older neurotypical types to call suicide watch, it's nearly impossible to tell. Regardless, it's more 'real' to me right now than the litany of pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps indoctrination that will result in an extra 36k deaths a year, and that's from the repeal of Obamacare alone.

"Patton, you Americans take watching films much too seriously. It's like going to church for you. For us, going to the cinema is just the same as going to the market to buy cabbages."

I didn't expect this to strike the chord that it did. It's meandering, flat, one-step-forward-two-steps-back, and ultimately far too close to the life I'm currently running the fast as I can in in order to stay in the same place. However, this made the moments of true emotion that much of a gutpunch, and there's little I'm more susceptible these days. In any case, I recommend this to all my fellow grinders who have hit their mid-twenties with nary a sign of life stability in sight. It'll either give you hope or sink you deeper, so the risk is yours.

Heavenly Bastard in the Sky, I missed the sharp edges of my life.

Cecily says

Narrative Style and Structure

As the title implies, this is a fragmentary account of youthful ambition, rather than a conventional novel. It is deliberately raw and unpolished: fast-paced, often angry and slightly stilted.

Some of the fragment titles are amusingly banal, such as "Fenfang sits on the edge of a swimming pool but doesn't get in", and in some ways that sums up the charm of this brief book.

Plot

Fenfang is a young Chinese woman who, around the turn of the millennium, leaves the claustrophobic monotony of her family and village life to go to Beijing and get into the film industry. Even once there, she is torn between the need to conform (her "Mao drawer") and desire to rebel (leaving home).

Of course, city life isn't quite as glamorous as she hoped: her boyfriend is awful and when she does get parts, they are as the most irrelevant extra. Nevertheless, she is determined and persistent.

Realistic or Not?

I was a little puzzled as to how her menial jobs enabled her to earn enough to live the life she describes and, despite the classes she took to better herself, was surprised that a self-described uneducated peasant likened someone to a Greek god and was reading Kafka - but I suppose that reflects my prejudices.

It presents some interesting insights into Chinese life and culture (though her description of Xian doesn't chime much with either of my visits). There is the cliché of the importance of not losing face, but in the

context of an only child and her parents, it is more poignant. The importance of knowing someone's age is explained and the terror of a police raid, even in "modern" China is conveyed.

Fictionalisation of Arrival in England

See her previous book, **A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers**, which I reviewed [HERE](#).
