



Red Poppies: A Novel of Tibet

Alai, Sylvia Li-Chun Lin (Translation), Howard Goldblatt (Translation)

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A lively and cinematic twentieth-century epic, Red Poppies focuses on the extravagant and brutal reign of a clan of Tibetan warlords during the rise of Chinese Communism. The story is wryly narrated by the chieftain's son, a self-professed "idiot" who reveals the bloody feuds, seductions, secrets, and scheming behind his family's struggles for power. When the chieftain agrees to grow opium poppies with seeds supplied by the Chinese Nationalists in exchange for modern weapons, he draws Tibet into the opium trade - and unwittingly plants the seeds for a downfall. Red Poppies is at once a political parable and a moving elegy to the lost kingdom of Tibet in all its cruelty, beauty, and romance.

Red Poppies: A Novel of Tibet Details

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From Reader Review Red Poppies: A Novel of Tibet for online ebook

Johnny says

My copy (it is 2002 edition of the english translation) has 433 pages, not 448.

It's a really fun book. At first I was enjoying it mildly. At a certain point the characters and story really captured me. Takes place in Tibet in the decades leading up to the communists taking over China. It tells a very interesting story of what life was like in Tibet, what the customs were and what people were like. From the point of view of a member of a ruling family. The men of the ruling family get to sleep with all kinds of women, which is kind of obnoxious. It tells some interesting history. I'm glad it pretty much stopped short of Red China period, because stories about Red China tend to be so depressing.

I really don't think I started this book on January 2nd. Oh well, what can I do? I need to start keeping better track of when I start and finish books. At least I know I finished this one on January 19th.

Stephanie says

Despite my memories of traveling through Tibet and my affinity for the Tibetan people*, I could not finish this book about a feudal warlord prince growing up in 1930s Tibet. My first clue should have been that it was published by the Chinese "People's Literature Publishing House" which struck me as disconcerting since this more than likely means that it's been sanctioned by the Chinese government, who have ruled Tibet and watered down and misrepresented its culture for the past half century or so.

Does this story represent a "typical" and "realistic" view of traditional Tibetan culture? Who knows. Regardless, the writing is stilted and this could be due to the translation or just the author's writing style and/or Chinese language conventions -- but the very idea that a book by a native Tibetan who now lives in China and who writes in Chinese should have been a red flag, as it were, to me as well.

The proletariat PR machine that published this book, made it a "bestseller" and then had it translated are sure good at what they do. How else would this have made it onto a library bookshelf in Lexington, KY (I bought this from Alibris, which sells castaway library books from around the country).

*Two weeks, a smidgen illegally, backpacking through Tibet in the mid 90s led my friend and I to meet many nice and good-hearted Tibetans. My favorite story is of two Tibetan nuns who offered us (more than a smidgen illegally) their straw bed and cauliflower soup during a rain storm. In the middle of the night, we heard them up on the roof fixing leaks so that we wouldn't get wet.

Mitrix says

One of the bests from Tibet.

True Reader says

Red Poppies by Alai, is an interesting piece not least because it is one of the few literary works that has passed the censors of China to make it's way from Tibet to the western world. Because of this, I have suspicions that the writer, who is Chinese, though has Tibetan heritage, portrayed the Tibetan people within the novel in a way the censors would approve of.

The story takes place in twentieth century Tibet, and the narrator is the second, and youngest son of a Tibetan warlord, the Maichi family. He tells us with nearly the first sentence of the books (certainly the first paragraph, I don't recall the book is somewhere in the house but I am lazy) that he is an idiot. Everyone thinks so. His older brother the heir, his mother, his nanny (who is also his first lover), his father... everyone.

However, it became apparent to me pretty early on that the narrator is not an idiot at all, he's actually very perceptive. People only think he's an idiot because he sometimes says things that are socially and politically inept. The plot follows "The Idiot's" moves and sexual exploits, his good and bad fortune as his father falls ill. The book is filled with hinted magic, or magical realism. Think One Thousand Years of Solitude by Garcia Marquez, so the magic could be coincidence... but could also be magic.

Though the book is interesting, I also feel like it dragged on a bit. Certain things were brought up throughout the book that I thought would have a profound impact, only to be cast by the wayside later. An interesting read if you're interested in what kind of literature makes it past the Chinese censors, but not my favorite read of the year, that's for sure—despite the book being deep and nuanced.

If you're interested in this book, check out your local bookstore, please, please, please, before looking on amazon.

Amanda says

Awkward translation, obscure subject matter, whiffs of magical realism, and plenty o' syphilis and opium. What's not to like?

Al says

I wanted to like this book. In fact the reason I gave it 2 stars instead of one is that I loved the setting and the feel of the book. And I liked the presentation of the main character (an "idiot"). But I felt the book was very negative (this is coming from someone who loves depressing books), and did nothing to bring the reader into the culture.

Nick says

This is a novel of Tibet, but not the idealized Western version. There are no mandalas, and what lamas

appear are barely disguised shamans. The petty despots who run this land, still feudal in the twentieth century, own slaves and give them away, employ executioners and have maids whose bodies are theirs for the asking. At least until China intervenes, first in its Republican era by introducing machine guns and opium poppies, then by overrunning the place in the form of the People's Army. The narrator describes himself as an idiot, and other characters debate whether he is or not, but idiocy in this case seems to arise from thinking unconventionally. Son of one of the local lords, he is less interested in making war than in creating markets, less interested in starving his enemies than in earning their gratitude by feeding them. He is the only, fleshed-out character; the rest are surface portraits, even when they behave in contradictory ways. It is a sad tale, this one of Tibet's demise, but it almost seems that this Tibetan author thinks that much was lost.

Brian says

A lush, gritty portrait of Tibetan feudal life told by the 'idiot' son of the second wife of a minor chieftain. Our unreliable narrator steadily learns the mechanics of governing an isolated fiefdom as it is buffeted by the changes of the 20th Century. From slavery to opium to Buddhism to Christianity to Communism, we get an unvarnished examination of the forces competing for the Tibetan soul.

Vickie says

Thank goodness I ordered the abridged version. I would not have been able to handle more. It was very hard getting through this book because it is poorly written (so much redundancy!), but more importantly, because there was not a single likable character in the story. I wish I had just read a short, non-fiction account of the culture and events during the early 20th century of the Tibetan area of Sichuan Province, China. It's an interesting slice of history, but I do not recommend this particular book for those who love historical fiction.

Litifa says

The only thing i had to say: this book was not for me and very confusing and gross!!

Aaron says

Finally, I managed to get around to reading this. A college professor of mine recommended it a few years back.

While I found it to be rather slow, the thing which kept me going was the main character. The "idiot" as he is called by everyone around him. His powers of observation, inquisitive nature, and reasoning make him something of a black sheep in that he does not always see the point in strictly adhering to the traditions, norms, and values which his family and society prescribe. He calls things like he sees it and this, in turn, garners him the label of "idiot."

The novel does an interesting job of articulating the Chinese invasion of Tibet towards the end, but mostly it is just a survey of Tibetan society from the perspective of our lovable idiot. Would recommend for anyone

interested in Tibetan literature/culture with an ability to endure an often slow read.

FicusFan says

An occasionally interesting, yet strangely unsatisfying read.

The setting is in Eastern Tibet, which has taken on more of China's attributes than the rest of Tibet. It starts just before the last Emperor is deposed.

The POV character is the second son, considered an idiot, of one of the Tibetan Chieftains. His birth circumstances guaranteed that he would be an idiot from birth, to those around him. They treat him like one, so he behaves like one. It gives him an advantage in that he can do or say anything in his highly regimented society and get away with it. But he is not considered worth listening to, or worthy of any specific task.

He isn't a bad character, but it gets tiring to follow him around. The story is slice of life, or what I call fly on the wall. You watch what goes on, there is no specific story or event. I enjoy this style if the events and setting are interesting enough. I didn't find that to be the case in this book. There were times when the characters or the settings were interesting, but the events never were (standard life stuff). Sometimes it was fun to see the 'idiot' come out on top or best those who thought they were smarter than he was. But the book was over 400 pages, and that was too long, not to have an actual story or purpose.

It was interesting to see the history of the region unfold with the coming of modernity. The story ends with the triumph of the Red Chinese and their penetration into Eastern Tibet.

The writing isn't bad, being a translation. At times it seems that they are trying to pass on the rustic manner of speaking. I found the story flowed well, it just didn't grab me with the content.

It is supposed to be the first in a trilogy, though I don't think any more have been published. If more are published, I won't be reading them.

It also should be noted that the person who wrote the book is an ethnic Tibetan, who lives in China. You can't be sure that this isn't positive propaganda, approved by the government to show the decadent pre-revolution lifestyle

Giuseppe Paola says

E' strano, diverso dai romanzi a cui sono abituata.

Raccontato in prima persona fino alla fine, modi di pensare e di agire molto lontani - ovviamente - a quelli cui siamo abituati. Forse era così anche da noi in quei tempi.

La storia di un figlio ritenuto "idiota" il quale invece fa la fortuna della famiglia, un figlio che vede lontano... Non è un libro che si legge d'un fiato, va assimilato poco alla volta, ma ne vale la pena.

My Tran says

Cu?n sách này ?ã cu?n hút tôi ngay t? nh?ng trang ??u tiên. Tôi b?t g?p B?i Tr?n L?ng ??ng c?a A Lai trong ph?n m?m Truy?n Audio trên ?i?n tho?i c?a tôi, m?t ph?n m?m mà truy?n 18+ chỉ?m h?n phân n?a s? sách.

Cái gi?ng ??c c?a ng??i ?àn ông, ch?m, tr?m và ? à mang c? cái l? l?m c?a bu?i sáng mù? ?ông c?a vùng ??t ng??i T?ng vào tâm trí c?a tôi. Và khi tôi quy?t ??nh t?t ngay audio ?? tìm b?n ebook ??c thì tôi ?ã b? cu?n hút h?n vào vùng ??t c?a nh?ng Th? ti, c?a nh?ng thung l?ng l?ng gió b?t ngàn, c?a cây hoa anh túc, c?a máu, c?a nh?ng cái ??u r?i, l??i c?t, ái ân... Tôi th?t s? thích nh?ng m?u ??i tho?i và c?t truy?n l? l?m c?a ti?u thuy?t này, khi mà ti?u thuy?t ngày nay g?n nh? ?ã bí ?? tài và d?n c?n ki?t thì quy?n sách này v?i v? l? l?m c?a nó nh? m?t lo?i h??ng mát lành th?i vào lòng ng??i ??c. Th?t ?áng ??c làm sao!

Dawn says

I am not loving this book. Maybe it has to do with the translation. Okay, I admit it. I did NOT finish this book. It's terrible. I know it will end in tragedy and I refuse to torture myself for the next three hundred pages just to find out that Tibet gets the shitty end of the stick. I already know that. If you are intrigued by entitled behavior, like to read about slaves being badly treated and are attracted to the effects of opium -- this book is for you. Oh, there is SOME little bit of history that is also sort of interesting.
