



# The House of Wives

*Simon Choa-Johnston*

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**The House of Wives** Simon Choa-Johnston

**Two women compete for the affections of their opium merchant husband in a tale of friendship, fortune and rivalry in colonial Hong Kong**

In 1862, a young Jew from Calcutta named Emanuel Belilios leaves his dutiful wife Semah and sets sail for Hong Kong to make his fortune in the opium trade. There, he grows into a prosperous and respectable merchant, eventually falling in love with his Chinese business partner's daughter Pearl, a delicate beauty twenty years his junior. As a wedding present, he builds for her the most magnificent mansion in Hong Kong. Then Semah arrives unannounced from Calcutta to take her place as mistress of the house...and life will change irrevocably for all of them.

Inspired by the lives of Choa-Johnston's ancestors, *The House of Wives* is an unforgettable novel about the machinations of the early opium trade, and about two remarkable women determined to secure a dynasty for their children in the tumultuous British Crown colony.

## The House of Wives Details

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Author : Simon Choa-Johnston

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# From Reader Review The House of Wives for online ebook

## Rex says

Step out of the here and now into an exotic world skillfully realized.

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## Erin says

**What makes a woman become a servant? And what makes her become the mistress? Is it money? Or birth?**

"The House of Wives" sweeps readers back to 19th century Calcutta. Simon Choa-Johnston weaves together a fascinating tale of two women and the man that they will fight to the death for. Not to mention that the descriptions transport the reader back to a bygone era.

Emanuel Belilos, is a young Jewish man, who seeks to outdo his businessman father and make his fortune. But before Emanuel can do all that he desires, he is wed to Semah Ezra. Semah, is young, intelligent, and beautiful. But both she and her new husband find themselves quite unhappy. With their marriage on unstable ground, Emanuel wastes no time in fleeing to Hong Kong, with firm hopes that he will make his fortune in the opium trade.

It is in Hong Kong where Emanuel meets Pearl, the daughter of one of his eventual partners. Over a number of years, their first meeting will lead to something much more. I'll get back to that in a bit.

Emanuel does return to Semah in Calcutta and although they briefly attempt to make their union a happy one, Semah remains barren and Emanuel's trips to Hong Kong become longer and longer. **My heart truly ached for Semah** At this point, I'm not feeling good about Emanuel and question whether he's really making an attempt at his marriage.

I have to talk about Pearl, 16 years old, who I was ready to not like. However, Pearl is well-educated, beautiful, and quick to speak up for herself. Of course, Emanuel falls in love and plans to woo Pearl. Like Semah, Pearl will also have her way and makes it very clear to her husband that she expects to be heard as an equal.

Their marriage turns out to be very passionate, but marital bliss is to be short lived. Because Semah arrives to fight for her rightful place at her husband's side. And there are definitely fireworks! But I couldn't stop admiring both of these strong minded women that certainly appeared to be made of stronger stuff than the man they call husband.

What Emanuel does next is certainly unprecedented in terms of any other story I've ever stumbled across. **He divides his home to accommodate both women.** I do declare that no soap opera writer could have unfolded the next series of chapters as fantastically as Choa- Johnston does.

As the women settle down into their new home, a conciliatory approach to their lives takes over as soon as they both become mothers. I will say that eventually Emanuel does manage to show a little bit more common sense in one aspect and began to enter my good graces. But not by much.

In addition, I absolutely loved and appreciated the author's note. Fascinating personal family history.

Thanks to NetGalley for a copy of this book in exchange for an honest review.

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### **Tina says**

I was drawn to the storyline and history of this novel. I found the characters captivating. Especially the two women whose personalities overshadow Emanuel's in the second half of this novel. The manipulation and loathing was like watching a tragedy unfold. If anything it was true to how women think and Choa-Johnston created such strong women with very different ideals.

The history of the opium trade in Hong Kong was also interesting to learn about. This was a good read, which was at parts slow moving but at the same time held my attention throughout.

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### **Shan says**

There are many things that drew me to this book - the setting and the time period because they are both something that I don't know much about or read about; the fact that it is a Canadian writer and this is the story of his ancestors; the plot of the two wives of one man living together in the same home. And all of this wrapped up together made for a lovely book. I learned so much about the culture and the time that I had never heard about mainly the Jewish communities in India, the opium trade between India and China. I also thought that the writing was beautiful and descriptive, I had read before that Choa-Johnston is a playwright and that is evident through the writing. A beautiful and interesting story.

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### **thereadingowlvina (Elvina Ulrich) says**

\*\*\*4.5 stars\*\*\*

Set in the 19th century, this is a heartrending and fascinating tale about Emanuel Belilios, a Jewish opium merchant from India & the two remarkable women who compete with each other for his love & affection. The fact that this story is inspired by the author's own family history and also about the opium trade in the British colony, Hong Kong, made this such an intriguing and engaging read.

The backdrop of the story is interesting as readers were transported back in time to early Calcutta and Hong Kong. The atmospheric descriptions of the landscapes and scenes are amazing. I particularly enjoyed how the author described the scenes of the busy Hong Kong harbour. I could visual it and it's like watching a movie. Rickshaws, busy markets and the dialogues between the Chinese and gweilos just reminds me so much of my childhood growing up in the historical state Malacca.

Characters are well developed I would say. This book is narrated in third person POV, from the three main characters (Emanuel, Semah and Pearl). I really like this type of narration because it allows me to have deeper connection with the character's emotions, thoughts and feelings.

This book is structured in three different parts with three different timelines, allowing readers to gain a

deeper understanding of the story and a deeper appreciation of the characters:

- Part 1 - Focused on the early lives of the 3 characters with their own backstories ;
- Part 2 - Emanuel's opium selling and trading business, and his time in Hong Kong;
- Part 3 - The feud between the wives and the sacrifices, struggles, heartbreak, friendship and betrayal between them.

I find most part of the story is engaging, especially the opium auction scenes which is intense and thrilling! The only dissatisfaction I have is the ending, which I felt it ended abruptly and rushed.

Overall, this is a good read and a must read for any historical fiction fans. A poignant yet captivating story, and a story that will linger in your mind for a long time. I'm still experiencing a book hangover!

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### **GinaRose Cristello says**

This was excellent. I was impressed by the author's ability to write as not one, but two women, with two distinct voices. Readers of my reviews know this is one of my signs of a good story! Authors who have to go further outside of their own personality and gender to write in the first character.

Anyway, it was very well done and I quite enjoyed the direction this took. it was surprising and unpredictable. a good read for summer!

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### **Sarah says**

3.5 stars. Knowing that this novel is based on the author's own ancestor, an opium merchant in Hong Kong and his two, yes two, wives peaked my interest. Through the ups and downs of their relationships and the rise and fall of fortunes, this is good story with some pacing issues. Still worth a read.

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### **Aditi says**

*“The thing about opium is that it makes pain or difficulty unimaginable.”*

----Sebastian Faulks

Simon Choa-Johnston, a Canadian author, pens a heart-touching yet intense historical fiction, *The House of Wives* that narrates the story of three human souls, all connected by the trade and the aura of opium, where an opium merchant gets so blinded by the hunger to be a successful businessman that he drags the two most important people of his life into it, thus irking up a crossfire between those two individuals, until they all find peace to live together.

### **Synopsis:**

*Two women compete for the affections of their opium merchant husband in a tale of friendship, fortune and*

*rivalry in colonial Hong Kong.*

*In 1862, a young Jew from Calcutta named Emanuel Belilios leaves his dutiful wife Semah and sets sail for Hong Kong to make his fortune in the opium trade. There, he grows into a prosperous and respectable merchant, eventually falling in love with his Chinese business partner's daughter Pearl, a delicate beauty twenty years his junior. As a wedding present, he builds for her the most magnificent mansion in Hong Kong. Then Semah arrives unannounced from Calcutta to take her place as mistress of the house...and life will change irrevocably for all of them.*

*Inspired by the lives of Choa-Johnston's ancestors, The House of Wives is an unforgettable novel about the machinations of the early opium trade, and about two remarkable women determined to secure a dynasty for their children in the tumultuous British Crown colony.*

Emanuel is a Jewish man who after the completion of his graduation, successfully lands himself up and guides himself to move towards the world of opium selling thereby earning a name as well as reputation in the society. And hence when an opportunity of marrying a rich Jewish businessman's daughter, Semah, with an overpriced dowry knocks up at the door, Emanuel grabs it immediately as he needs capital to take a voyage to Hong Kong where he will finally set up his opium trading business. Luckily for him, things get accordingly as his plan and Emanuel earns a name in the rich and aristocratic Jewish community in Calcutta. In one of his many Hong Kong trips, Emanuel falls head over heels in love with a Chinese young woman, Pearl, and he instantly marries her and welcomes her to a mansion built especially for her in Hong Kong, and within a few months too, Emanuel's first wife, Semah, too lands up in that very same mansion where he lives with his second wife, Pearl. Immediately an inevitable war of extreme hatred starts between the two women, and Emanuel must do something to stop his two wives from hating each other and not to mention, Emanuel is in dire need of a heir, but can these two women provide him?

The author has penned this book based on his grandfather's personal experience thereby telling an untold story that spans through so many decades. This story is mainly focused on opium selling and trading during the British era both in Calcutta, India and in Hong Kong, that which the readers are not much aware about, hence the author did a marvelous job in opening as well as enlightening the minds of the readers about this lesser known opium trade and its harmful yet alluring effects through this story. The book's cover image turns out to be quite enchanting for the eyes of the readers reflecting an irresistible aura through it.

The author's writing style is extremely expressive and eloquent as he laces the whole story with evocative emotions that holds the power to move the readers deeply. The narrative is poignant and interesting enough to keep the readers hooked into the story line till the very end, and not to mention, the dialogues are inspired from local dialect with its proper translation, thereby making the book an informative one for the readers. The story has a moderate pace, as there are so many layers that the author has depicted with so much detailing that will make the readers visualize those right before their own eyes. The story is told in third person POV from the three character's voice, and at the end of each chapter, the author has ended it with an unexpected twist, that will make the readers anticipate for the conclusion.

The backdrop is simply magical and striking that will instantly transport the readers both back in time and back to a destination. The story is set against the British ruled Calcutta in localities of Jews where they made their name and living in the society. The author has painted that portrait of Calcutta by vividly capturing its then streets filled with hand-pulled rickshaws, European fashion, English folks, the crowded alleys of hawkers shouting at the top of their lungs, business hungry Jews, and the Hoogly river thus reflecting an old yet rich Calcutta that local readers can easily relate to. The portrait of Hong Kong is splendidly arrested for

the larger part of the story, with its traditional-styled palaces, to the then fashion, to its warm nature people to its politics to its finance to its landscapes, which will make the readers feel that authentic flair and aura through the author's words while reading this book. The timeline too is in perfect sync with the landscapes and the culture of both Calcutta and Hong Kong.

The characters are quite well-developed, as they are laced with multi-dimensions that are revealed by the author gradually with the course of the story. The characters have depth as they are supported by backstories, right from the very beginning of their childhood, that will make the readers easily comprehend with the characters' mindset. Emanuel is a man who is not only hard working but is way too ambitious that on his journey to achieve success and power that he forgets about the people who loves and cares about him, although his flaws are what makes him so interesting, on the other hand, Semah has forever yearned for love from her husband, but she rarely got it from him, yet she devoted her life towards him thus making her brave with a weakness in her heart. And lastly, Pearl is another such woman who despite of getting love from her husband, has always despised him as he allowed his first wife to share the same roof with her, her jealousy gave her a power that readers will find it intimidating about her. Yes, all three characters are not only flawed but has also undergone lot of struggles and challenges that will only make them look real in the eyes of the readers. Long after the end of the story, the readers will find it difficult to shake the three prominent and striking characters from their heads. The supporting characters are also well etched out.

The story is not only about opium trade, but is also about love and mostly about an unusual friendship that could not wither away even in the end when there was no perfect happy ending. The author portrays the bond of two wives with so much emotion, transition, challenges and shared motherhood that the readers are bound to feel a connection towards these two women.

In a nutshell, this intriguing book will compel the minds of all the historical fiction as well as the contemporary fiction readers, but I suggest, this is a must read heart-breaking yet exciting story that needs to be experienced by one and all.

**Verdict:** *A poignant yet enlightening story about two wives and lots of opium between them.*

**Courtesy:** *Thanks to the author, Simon Choa-Johnston's publicist for giving me the opportunity to read and review this book.*

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## **Megan says**

This is not a book or a subject that would normally interest me but this book kept me fascinated the whole way through. His characters are beautifully drawn, flaws and all. This odd family saga sucks you in from the opening pages. I highly recommend this book.

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## **Frances says**

I was in Hong Kong as I read this and really enjoyed being able to actually go to some of the places they spoke of. This was an interesting story of a love triangle. To find that it was based on some of the author's actual family made it even more interesting. I hadn't realized the involvement of India and the Jewish people in the opium trade. I was a bit disappointed with the ending. It felt rushed.

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## Erika says

Based on the life of the author's grandfather, this is a fascinating story about the opium trade in Asia in the late 1800s. It is also the story of what brings two wives together as equals instead of rivals. Very well written. I loved all the characters. I would read more by this author.

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## Cassandra says

In *The House of Wives* we meet Emanuel, a Jewish man from India born into a comfortable family. He has ambitions for more and so marries a woman who brings a large dowry. Emanuel invests his money into the opium trade and spends the next decade building his investments. His marriage is unsatisfying and ultimately he decides to move to Hong Kong permanently. He falls for a woman much younger and after she converts to Judaism marries her on the condition that he will give up his first wife. But wife #1 doesn't take that news lightly and journeys to China to take her place by her husband. Which brings us to the *House of Wives* - two very strong and stubborn women under one roof.

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Choa-Johnston writes beautifully. Each of the characters has a distinct voice and the setting is vivid.

There were a few plot points that I found uncomfortable and ultimately made Emanuel's character distasteful to me. So, I found the first part of the book that focused on him to be less engaging.

Once the women came together, I felt the book started to come alive and I admit I had a hard time putting it down because I wanted to see the development of their very complicated relationship.

Won in a giveaway but this did not affect my review.

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## Mirella says

A fascinating plot based on the author's own family lore - two women, one English, and the other Chinese, share one husband and live under the same roof. The author wrote the novel in such a way that the reader does not blame, but rather can sympathize with the husband and his two wives. Each of them is wonderfully portrayed with their own rational thoughts, choices, and feelings which lent credence to their plight.

Beyond the family drama, the author did an exceptional job of relaying the historical details of the opium trade with all its intrigues, wealth, and associated crime. Life in Hong Kong during that era was also vibrantly recreated. Although the pacing sometimes slowed, the entire novel was beautifully written with a gentle and easy to read prose. I very much enjoyed reading the author's personal notes at the end of the book which described his own family history.

This book would initiate very interesting discussions for book groups. For fans of historical fiction who want an exotic setting weaved into an intricate plot, then this is the book to read. Truly fascinating from start to

finish.

y unique and different solution to his multiple wife issue which was quite different than how others had handled similar situations during that time and makes for a very unique story. Choa-Johnston's writing was quite descriptive in regards to the era and cultures and I appreciated that he included a description of his family history at the back of the book to give his readers more background information. Overall, this was a good read. It was an interesting look at different cultures, the author's unique family history and the power and strength of women.

Disclaimer: My sincere thanks to Penguin Group - Random House Publishing for providing me with a complimentary paperback copy of this book in exchange for my honest review.

Thank you to Penguin Group - Random House Publishig for providing me with a free copy of this book in exchange for an honest review.

Thank you for visiting my blog, <http://greathistoricals.blogspot.ca>, where the greatest historical fiction is reviewed! For fascinating women of history bios and women's fiction please visit <http://www.historyandwomen.com>.

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## **Laurie • The Baking Bookworm says**

Rating: 3.5/5 stars

What drew me initially to this book is the idea of two women of different cultures, in 19th century Hong Kong, finding out that they share a husband. Talk about family drama! What was even more amazing is that author Simon Choa-Johnston based his book on his own unique family history.

The reader is pulled into the personal turmoil of both women as they learn to live with each other and their families, with limited success. Choa-Johnston does a good job giving the wives Semah and Pearl very distinct voices and as a reader I could sympathize with the struggle of each of the women. It was sad to think of all of the years wasted that the two women could have been supportive and close but at the same time sharing one's husband wasn't something that either of them signed up for.

While I found the premise quite interesting, for me there was a distinct difference between the first two-thirds of the book and the remaining third. The first two-thirds, as we meet the wives and see how Emanuel's business takes off, was quite interesting. Choa-Johnston brings to life the Jewish and Chinese cultures as well as the energy of Hong Kong. I'd rate that first part of the book a solid four stars with the remainder of the book dropping to three stars. It was still interesting but I found the energy to wane which was surprising since it's at that point when the wives come together and I thought there'd be emotional fireworks. During the last third of the book there were also large chunks of time that were quickly explained away but this resulted in me not having as much of an emotional connection to the wives, and even less with Emanuel as the story began its conclusion.

Emanuel came to a very unique and different solution to his multiple wife issue which was quite different than how others had handled similar situations during that time and makes for a very unique story. Choa-Johnston's writing was quite descriptive in regards to the era and cultures and I appreciated that he included a description of his family history at the back of the book to give his readers more background information.

Overall, this was a good read. It was an interesting look at different cultures, the author's unique family history and the power and strength of women.

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### **Patsey says**

A good story. Maybe dragged a bit. The opium trade in China is always fascinating reading. Must reread the Amit Ghosh series.

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