

# THE ISLAND OF SEA WOMAN

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Lisa See is an American writer and novelist who was born in 1955 in Paris, and currently lives in Los Angeles. In 1979, she graduated from Loyola Marymount University. In 2001, she was honored with the National Woman of the Year award given by the Organization of Chinese Americans Women (OCAW). Some of her most distinguished works include *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, *Peony in Love*, *Shanghai Girls*, *Dreams of Joy*, *China Dolls*, or *The Tea Girl of Hummingbird Lane*.

Her life and work has been greatly impacted by the fact that she is also part Chinese since her paternal great-grandfather, Fong See (龐泗), was Chinese. Through her work, Lisa See has been able to successfully represent China's unique culture.

*"When we go to the sea, we share the work and the danger. We harvest together, sort together, and sell together, because the sea itself is communal."*

In *The Island of Sea Women*, Lisa See approaches South Korean culture by writing about the *haenyeo* from Jeju Island (South Korea's largest island located in the Korea strait). The name *haenyeo* can be translated to "sea women" and consist of fierce female divers whose way of life depends on the harvest of sea life. The *haenyeo* dive repeatedly up to 98 feet into the ocean while holding their breath to gather different types of seafood such as sea urchins, abalone, sea cucumbers, or conches from the ocean floor. As one can imagine, it is an activity that entails great risk.

*"Every woman who enters the sea carries a coffin on her back. In this world, in the undersea world, we tow the burdens of a hard life. We are crossing between life and death every day."*

One of the most interesting facts about this novel is the matrifocal society it depicts. In Jeju Island, it is the women who are responsible for working and bringing money to the household, and it is the husbands who do the housework and raise the children.

*"It was a wife's social and familial duty to birth a son, who would lengthen her husband's lineage. But every family in the seaside villages of Jeju was most grateful for the birth of a daughter, because she would always be a provider."*

This unique culture has existed for centuries and was added in 2016 to UNESCO's List of Intangible Cultural Heritage. However, today it represents a tradition that may soon be lost. The effects of globalization, young people moving into the cities, and the pollution of the

environment pose a threat to the *haenyeo* despite the Jeju government's efforts to preserve this traditional profession.

*"The sea is better than a mother. You can love your mother, and she still might leave you. You can love or hate the sea, but it will always be there. Forever. The sea has been the center of her life. It has nurtured her and stolen from her, but it has never left."*

*The Island of Sea Women* tells the story of two girls, Mi-ja and Young-sook, who establish an 80-year-long friendship as *haenyeo*. The story begins with Young-sook telling Mi-ja's granddaughter, Janet, and Janet's daughter, Clara, the story about her friendship with Mi-ja and how she became part of the *haenyeo*.

*"When you're seven, you can say you'll be best friends forever. It rarely turns out that way. But Mi-ja and I were different. We grew closer with each passing season."*

Mi-ja and Young-sook's friendship began when they were young, and as time passed it became stronger, especially after facing several hardships. With the occupation of Korea by the Japanese during World War II, they both move to work in Vladivostok in Russia, later to return to Jeju Island.

*"...No one could top my mother's voice. "Independence for Korea!" For everything Mother did in her life, and for all the ways she protected and inspired the women in her diving collective, this was the moment of which I was most proud."*

The story continues with the separation of the Korean Peninsula into North and South Korea. Furthermore, it portrays the chaos that takes over Jeju Island resulting in the Bukchon massacre, a cruel episode in South Korea's history during which innocents were slaughtered as the result of an uprising in the island.

*"More people died in Bukchon than in any other village during all the years of the 4.3 Incident. Those who survived the three days of torture and killing (...) were forced to help deal with hundreds of bodies. (...) We had nothing to return to, since every house in Bukchon had been burned, but the need for survival brought us together."*

Certain events lead to the two women to put an end to their friendship and follow separate ways in life. Deep and powerful emotions such as betrayal, hatred, and fear take over the story. Finally, the power of forgiveness will bring the two women back together in a very peculiar way.

*"My grandmother never stopped loving you," Janet says. "She accepted what she did, and she wanted you to know everything. This we've brought to you."*

To sum up, *The Island of Sea Women* is a novel that provides the reader with a new perspective about the reality faced by brave and powerful women who managed to face terrible hardships

during their lifetime and fought to uphold Jeju's long-lasting *haenyeo* tradition. A story that will bring the reader closer the fascinating culture and history of South Korea.

Those interested in learning more about Lisa See's novel may visit her official webpage at <https://www.lisasee.com/islandofseawomen/>. The website includes additional information about *haenyeo* culture as well as Lisa See's trip to Jeju Island.